

C.M.HANO



XORA

BOOK ONE TAROTVERSE

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The Tarot Community.



PROLOGUE

FOUNDED ON THE PEAK OF THE WOODLANDS, THE SETTLEMENT OF Narborim is home to a mix of Elves and Humans ruled by the usurper King. The settlement itself looks unattractive. With its galvanized steel rooftops, decaying walls, and unmaintained gardens, Narborim has an ominous atmosphere. This nearly desolate town has a deprived economy, which is mainly supported by timber and trawl. But their biggest strengths are dedicated to tailoring and ocean fishing. However, Narborim lacks the blissful and glorious beauty that graces the rest of Xora. During the winter, the beautiful white snow falls consistently, leaving a glistening display of pearls across the town.

A young half-ling with chocolate, short hair that slightly exposes a skinny face, and eclectic blue eyes, watches attentively over the chaotic town. Soft dark skin charmingly compliments her human nose and ears. A stranger amongst humans and elves. There is something captivating about her, perhaps it is the fact that she is the only one of her kind.

An expression of fear and the feeling of panic rises within her as she witnesses the Gnaxtor Army tear through the neighboring houses, determined to find the hidden treasures within. Their body armor is made of steel and sharp at each end of the shoulders. The only skin that can be

shown is the faintest touch of green exposed only by the eyeholes in each rounded helmet.

“Check this house!” A larger, more authoritative Gnaxtor, the General no doubt, orders each soldier with an authoritative growl.

“You must hide now!” the half-ling’s Mother grabbed her assertively and with fear in her face, she lifted a piece of wood from their timbered floor. “You must ’n say a word. And whatever happens, know that I love you. Do not move until he comes for you. Do you understand?”

She did not protest her Mother and stayed as quiet as a mouse. Before she encloses the half-ling in her dark crawl space, she reaches out and hands her a silver amulet shaped like a star. No words, only a look of endearment and understanding.

The dark voice of a Gnaxtor can be heard from within the small hiding spot under the rotten oak wood floors. The half-ling is left shivering with each cold breeze of the winter storm. She keeps her mouth covered to quiet the sound of her chattering teeth. And uses her breath to warm her freezing digits.

“Knock it down!” her heart begins to beat rapidly as she watches and waits for their house to be searched next. Her Mother never told her what the Gnaxtor were searching for, and she never questioned why.

With a hurried and angered kick, the already half rotted wood door, sends splinters flying through the air. Through the small slivers between each board, the half-ling watches in terror as the scene above unfolds.

“Where is she?” the loud clinking of metal boots echoes throughout the hollowed house. “I said, where is the half-ling?” a large green skinned hand, with four digits, and sharpened black claws firmly grasps the ragged brown collar of her now seemingly unafraid Mother.

No answer

“If you insist on remaining mute, perhaps removing your tongue will make you concede.” That did not make any sense to anyone. Another

Gnaxtor, lower level due to the color of his armor, whispers something in the General's long pointed green ears. "Search the house, this one is coming with me." Without speaking, the half-ling's Mother's brown eyes grew a slight wave of worry within the blue irises.

Without a second thought, the half-ling watched her Mother move faster than a Griffon, unsheathing the General's sword and slicing his head clean off. Dark black blood oozed into the creaks and onto the frightened face of the half-ling girl. With extraordinarily little room to move, she was unable to prevent anymore from oozing onto her.

More soldiers swarmed the hut and took custody of her Mother. One last glance, sending waves of Essence, the half-ling felt the unconditional love of her Mother.

WITH THE RAID of Gnaxtor gone, they took one prize but unknowingly left another. Alone, drenched in dried black fluids, and shivering underneath the wetness of her ragged clothes. The Halfling waits, tightly holding onto the last gift her Mother gave her. Tears shedding down her face, merely leaving burning streaks on her frosted cheeks. A creak in the floorboards above does not seem to affect the trance the half-ling is in.

"Little girl, you can come out now." The hushed voice of an older sounding man came from above. "Your Mother sent me. You have no need to fear me."

As he stepped over the board above her, he felt it slightly give way. A small lantern lights up the dark space as the board is lifted to reveal the shivering dark haired half-ling, clinging to a small piece of jewelry.

TEN YEARS LATER

SERENA



“ARE YOU READY?” BLACK, STRAIGHT HAIR SLIGHTLY COVERS A STRONG, smiling face. Sympathetic hazel eyes, gaze upon the timid nature of a friend. Soft olive skin gracefully compliments her curved bodice. Niya, a true Justice among elves. She stands towering among others, despite her curvy frame.

“I suppose so.” Niya looked radiant as ever. Dressed in her fairly short sleeved, furred jacket covering her to well above her waist. The finest furs from the polar bears no doubt. Someone of her stature and Essence would only wear the finest clothes. The sleeves of her jacket are incredibly wide and reach down to her hands, they are decorated with a golden cluster of leaves showing her status as a Confessor.

Confessors are the most respected Essence in the realm. It could be more fear than respect but that is because of their power. With the draw of one simple looking parchment, and their ability to bend you to their will with just one single gesture, fear could be certain.

“Niya, where will you go? I mean while I am there? Will we ever see each other again?” Due to the nature of my being, I am being transported to train at Galavian. That is where all the powerless go to train to become warriors or assassins.

“Of course, you will see me again. Once you complete your training, I will get you and we will be under the Queens Tenor ship together.” Queen Lilac was a tyrant just like her late-Father. It was because of his rule, that the Dark Elf was able to claim more than half of Xora for himself.

“Don’t worry Serena, you will do great.” Of course, I did not believe her. She saw that in my eyes and hugged me. The feel of her small leather belt buckle jabbed me in the stomach. It is customary for her kind to where it over their silk satin white dress. “I can feel your doubt. Tell me what it is that is truly bothering you?”

Had she used her power on me? “I am an outsider everywhere I go,” I could not stop myself. “My Mother was a human that was taken by the Gnaxtor for having me. I have no clue who my Father is. I don’t have Essence and for a person or abomination as everyone else calls me, that isn’t supposed to be normal.” I saw her empathetic golden irises stare directly through me.

“What if I escorted you to Galavian? Would that make it better?” I cannot believe she is using her powers on me.

“Niya!” her eyes widened, “Stop using your Essence on me! We talked about this.” When the Old Father took me from my home that day, some ten years ago, I lived within the church. It was not much with its cracked stained-glass windows, and wooden frame. Every Sunday, the congregations would come to say thanks to Ancient Marseilles for creating the Tarot Decks and the Essence given to control them. Niya would come with her family every day after her lessons to play with me. She used her card on me when we first met. Even for an eleven-year-old, her Essence was powerful.

“You are right. I promise I will not use them again.” Half of me believed her but the other half, perhaps the human half did not.

“Serena Ozark,” the thunderous voice of an Illuminate came from behind us. “By order of Queen Lilac, you are to be transported to Galavian

to start your training immediately.” It was one of the Queens Guards at the door. I let out a sigh of defeat. Or perhaps sorrow. And looked toward my friend once more.

“Niya,” I longingly looked at her and before I said anymore, she hugged me tightly and kissed me on the cheek. I blushed slightly.

“I give you a kiss of luck my dearest friend. Go and be well. We will meet again.”

ALWIN



IT'S BEEN A DECADE SINCE THE GNAXTOR MADE THEIR APPEARANCE. Tramping through Xora, taking half-ling children from their Mother's breast. Narborim was their last stop hunting the Phoenix herself.

Odith has been watching her every day sense the attack. On my orders of course.

"How is she today?" The black coffee soothes my sore throat. The only invention the humans have gotten correct in the last two centuries.

"They are transporting her to Galavian." Looking through the pool of water, I can see her. Beautiful russet hair, bright sapphire-colored eyes, and flawless skin. "Do you want me to intervein?"

Odith knows the importance of Serena Ozark. Her untouched power will free us from being slaughtered by the purebloods. It has been prophesied since I was a child. Before the Kings and Queens of old decided to hunt us down for my Father's nefarious deeds.

"Alwin, there will come a day when the phoenix is born. You must save her from the genocide that threatens our existence."

"How will I find her? Who is she?" Mother takes a shortened finger and begins to read along the written word within the grimoire of old.

"The prophecy reads. In two centuries from today, the phoenix will be born of a human woman.. Hunted buy all for the blood that runs through

her veins, she will need protection.”

“We just need to watch her. The decision to come to us must be of her own freewill.” Watching her ride towards the palace, I cant help but admire her beauty. Odith must sense it.

“She is quite beautiful.” Breaking my stare, I look over at the pink haired half-ling.

“Yes, she is.” I mutter.

“Alwin,” she starts then shuffles her feet acting nervous.

“What is it Odith?”

“You don’t have a wife. I don’t think I have ever seen you with anyone, but she has potential. She could be your Queen.” She states while pointing at Serena’s image. It is true that I have never chosen a woman to be in my life. Never taking a partner for my own.

“I don’t need a Queen. Serena has a far more important purpose. She needs training, discipline, and focus.”

“But she will only get those if she chooses to come here. To be with us and learn. If you let me use a card-”

“No, you are not going to use magic to persuade her. You know what will happen if you use the cards for nefarious means.” Her head droops low. “Odith, you are my most loyal soldier and friend. I accept your advice and guidance in all things. But finding me a Queen is not one of them.”

“Maybe if you finally get laid you won’t be so uptight.” She spats back shocking me with her brutality. “I just want to see you happy for once in your life.”

“I will be happy once we are free of repression. Don’t you want to be accepted for not just being a halfling but wanting to be with another woman?”

“I want that more than anything.” We both went quiet. “If you don’t pursue a relationship with her, do I have your blessing to?”

I let out a laugh which she matches. Odith was ridiculed and hunted for being a halfling. They killed her lover right in front of her before I could rescue her. It took a week before she started feeling comfortable around me.

“Serena Ozark’s purpose is to embrace her true form and bring peace to the realm. I don’t want her to be distracted by anyone. Plus, she has eyes for her Confessor friend Niya.”

“Do I sense jealousy?” Odith teases.

“No.” I answer. “Come, we need to prepare a room for her arrival.”

“What makes you think she will say yes?” I shot her knowing smile. I don’t know if she will say yes, but perhaps she will once she speaks with Odith. Serena is exquisite and I flush at the thoughts of getting to know her. I haven’t met her yet, but I find her alluring, mysterious, and challenging.

SERENA



THE TREK TO GALAVIAN WOULD BE A THREE-DAY RIDE. THE ILUMINATE were said to have the Essence that controlled *The Moon Card*. This gave them the ability to create portals. I wonder why they did not just open one up and march us all through. It would be easier on me. A rough ride for someone who was not used to being on a horse at all.

“Why don’t they just conjure up a portal?” I whispered to a scrawny brown-haired boy next to me. He did not answer me or even look at me. He must be afraid. The thing about being a half-ling is, that everyone knows because you have the hair and body of an Elve but the nose and ears of a human.

“Because only *certain* Iluminate can conjure up one.” A scratchy voice came from the other side of the boy. I looked over and saw an older woman with grey hair and wrinkled skin, reminding me of the old witches from the story books Old Father read to me. I did not dare speak another word. Someone who looked like that and ate her hog leg with sharp yellow teeth like it was her last meal, gave me a slight panic in my chest. Or perhaps just a nauseous feeling in my stomach.



THE ROUGH LEATHER saddle rubbed my inner thighs the wrong way. By the time we reached our journey's end, I had friction burns that needed to be assessed by the Reiki Healers. I have never been on a horse before, and I never wanted to be again. But, for non-magic users, there was no other means of transportation. We could not conjure a portal using *The Moon Card*. Although, I would use that to go anywhere and everywhere if I had the chance. Maybe I could be like Niya. The memory of her soft velvet lips pressed upon my cheek, sent a flutter through my stomach, and made my heart long for her.

Of course, I have never told her how I felt, but with her power, I feel like she already knew. The thing about being a Confessor and wielding that card, you are not permitted to mate with any other Essence. And there is the fact that we are both women. Both are forbidden and if caught, it would result in immediate execution. If I could choose which Essence to be, it would not be to control The Moon it would be to control the Justice. Then I could be with her. We could fly away on her Griffon. Find a place where us being with one another would be safe.

Confessors, like Niya, are given a Griffon. Due to the nature of their work, they need to be able to make it anywhere in the world within an hour. Griffons are marvelous and majestic beasts. These charming, but quite common creatures, are a type of mammal. They are about the size of a horse, have four legs and a long tail with a small bushel of hair at the end. They have thick, smooth skin covered in short, coarse hairs which is usually either bronze, light gold, or a combination of these colors.

They live with their assigned Confessor but are raised in the high mountains. They are omnivores and their relatively large beaks, and narrow tongue are ideal for eating a wide variety of things. One flaw is that they are nocturnal and rely on their sight and extra senses to get around during the day. They have two symmetrical slits to smell their prey. And large, round mid-night eyes sit well within their fairly large heads.

These creatures are very peaceful, and they remain unconditionally loyal to their Confessor. I have yet to meet one in person, but when I see Niya again, I will get to meet hers.



UPON DISMOUNT OF MY HORSE, I gazed upon the marvelous glistening city of Galavian. Seven cerulean thick, round towers penetrate the blue sky. Each are connected by huge, thin walls made of quartz stone. Quaint windows are scattered here and there across the walls in a symmetric pattern, along with asymmetric crenellations for archers.

A pronounced entry with thick metal doors, a draw bridge, and a large crenellation with guards to the only entrance to the fortress. It is the only easy way in, but easy is very relative here. Opulent fields of crops surround the castle walls and provides the inhabitants with food all year round. This citadel shows no signs of decay after being around for ages, but that is due to the Essence naturally flowing within the earth.

“So, you’re the half-ling?” I turned my astonished gaze to the deep voice coming from behind me. “I was expecting more.” Black, short hair tight in a ponytail reveals a round, warm face. Piercing brown eyes, set delicately within their sockets, look slowly over me. Judging the abomination standing a few feet away from him.

“Yeah, so?” I said sounding frustrated. Everywhere I go, I am judged because I was born different.

“Half-lings are an abomination, and you shouldn’t be given the honor of training in Galavian.” The audacity of this man-child to sit here and call me that. Before I knew it, my fist was connecting with the small scar sitting atop his right cheekbone.

“Do you know who I am?” the look of anger in his wide muddy eyes told me he was someone important. “I am Orlando Zain.” He grabbed my

wrists and restrained them behind my back. I tried to resist but the strength he had over me, was too much.

“Yea well to me you are a spineless coward that thinks its right to insult someone based on their looks alone.” I did not know who he was, but his grasp loosens as he apologized. I turned to look at him, there is something misleading about him, it is the sudden change of expression at my logical words.

It was paralyzing. He walked away with haste in each step, landing at his spot in the formation of one-hundred other recruits. “Hurry up half-ling, the Queen waits for no one.”

The Queen. The words bounced off my ears. “Why are we meeting- “
“Shut it and get in formation!” the soldier interrupted.

We marched in two by two, shock and awe went through each row as murmured words of *wow* and *so glorious* were all I heard. The person walking next to me remained quiet. He was that scrawny little man from the night before. With barely enough meat on him, he seemed like a ghost trapped in a body. Pale white skin, cold to the touch. And lifeless eyes too afraid to look at anything but the path ahead.

“Hi, my name is Serena.” I thought making conversation would help ease his fears, but he just remained mute. *Maybe it is because of me.* My entire life, some people shunned me, and others cowered from the sight of me. Old Father would say it is because I was the first half-ling to be ever born and survive. When news got out that a half-ling grew to the mature age of ten, that is when the Gnaxtor King sent his armies searching all over Xora.

Tears swelled in my eyes as the painful memory of my Mother being dragged away by those ghastly beasts flooded my mind. Soon, the images faded as we entered the corridor that was decorated with many different pieces of fine art. Narrow lanterns attached to the side of each of the silver columns, illuminate the entire throne hall and allow shadows to cavort

where light cannot reach. The clear crystal of the windows in the dome ceiling dance in the flickering light.

“No wonder Narborim is so poor. All the money from the taxes gets put into this place.” In an instant, I covered my mouth as the words just spilled out. *I pray no body heard that.* It seemed as though I said it in the lowest tone that only I could hear it. I glanced over at my marching partner, and even my treasonous words could not take him out of his trance. *You poor boy. The Ancients will watch over us.*

We stopped just short of the large steel doors that lead into the throne room. The General gave a loud knock with the bronzed Griffon-like handles. In a matter of seconds, the large doors opened wide to reveal the most beautiful sight I have ever seen.

A cerulean rug runs down from the throne and splits to encircle the entire hall. While pointed banners with the crest of Xora at the center, stand erect with pride. Between each pennant, stands a large, bronzed chandelier, all have been lit and in turn brighten the vast hall.

At the center, a radiant throne of granite graces the bosom of her royal majesty Queen Lilac. Wearing a regal red dress that leaves her olive-skinned shoulders uncovered. Her plunging neckline is embellished with cerulean ruffles. Front center of her breast is a brooch. Appearing to match the same colors on the Crest of Xora. A delicate red rose with a glistening circle of golden Griffins imprinted on the blue armor of each Illuminate Guard.

“Your Majesty, I present to you the new recruits for your regal guard.” Her matted red lips look down upon the General with a smirk of intrigue.

“Spread out.” No one moved at the command. This made the General tense up.

“The Queen has commanded you to spread out. Move it!” he frantically waved his arms for us to split our formation of doubles into two separate rows. I was now looking at the scrawny frightened man that once

walked beside me. Black, straight hair hangs over a thin, nervous face. Frozen gray eyes, watch timidly while the Queen makes her way down to each recruit, finding each and every flaw.

“What’s your name young man?” she gently asked.

“My...my name is...Trevor...your majesty.” He answered with a stutter. *I feel sorry for the lad. If the Queen does not like him, she could send him to the Iron Pits.* That dark prison is full of the cruelest villains and monsters Xora had. Or that we have discovered. It was built over the lava mines just below the Black Rock.

“Trevor, you seem nervous. Tell me something, are you willing to die for your Queen?” he nodded his head, still trembling. “Why don’t I believe you?” she snapped her fingers and, in an instant, a hooded figure wearing all white appeared next to her.

Is that who I think it is? I watched in awe as the hooded figure raised a card and recited an incantation. In a blast of white, a transparent figure dressed in a crimson robe with gold embellishments, and a golden crown upon his head. In his hand, he wields a majestic sword. *The Sword of Justice. Niya.* I had recognized that amount of Essence anywhere.

This is the first time I ever witnessed her, or any Confessor, use their Essence to conjure their Tarot. It was mesmerizing. My feelings of admiration for that woman grew ten-fold.

“Do not be afraid.” Her gentle hand was pressed against his pale face. “Answer the Queen with honesty.”

“I am afraid my Queen.” Those words poured out his mouth like vomit.

“Very Good Niya. You may go.” She retracted her Tarot and The Justice disappeared. Niya gave a regal bow, as she turned our eyes met for a few seconds. I sensed pain and worry in her. Something I have never seen before. Reading that boy must have hurt her somehow. I turned my gaze back to the Queen. Her hand was pressed upon Trevor’s face. I

watched as his trembling scrawny figure transformed into a pile of ash. “The Queen has no use for scared boys and girls in her Guard.”

The horrific sight that laid before me made my heart begin to beat fast. *If she did not like a scared human, what will she think of me?*

“Clean this up.” Her eyes glanced around the room, looking for her next victim. My breath was taken for only a moment as her stone-cold eyes landed on me. “You,” she said while pointing directly at me, “come here to me.” I did as I was commanded and tried to swallow my fear.

“You are a strange looking Elve. Who are your parents?” she asked while examining me closely.

“My Mother was a human, and my Father was an Elve. They both died when I was merely a child.” I said with the upmost respect. Her gloved hand, still smelling of burnt flesh, traced my body from head to toe, sending an uneasy feeling up and down my spine.

“What is your name half-ling?”

“Serena your majesty.” She signaled for the General to come to her and whispered something in his ear. I could not make it out.

“You may all be dismissed to Salma Hall to begin your training with the Reiki Master. I expect you will do well to serve me proudly when the time comes.” The crowded hall dispersed, and I began to follow the rest out but not before I was pulled by my collar.

“You will stay for a moment. The Queen request a private audience with you.” *I am going to become the next pile of ash. Niya, where are you?* I searched around the room for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. The Queen possessed Essence. I am not sure of what kind gives you the ability to turn people into ash, but whatever it was, I did not want to be her next victim.

“Serena, I hope you don’t mind me seeking a private audience with you?” *Did she just ask me that?*

“It is an honor your majesty.” I attempted to curtsy, but I was no good at it and lost my balance this gave the Queen a laugh.

“You poor child.” She gestured me toward her. “I need to get a better look at you. You see I am interested in you. I wonder how you came to be and why you have no Essence. A magnificent creature like yourself should have some kind of Essence.” I could sense the curiosity within her.

“I do not know how to answer” before I could finish, a hooded figure appeared. I recognized the white furred coat with the golden leaf cufflinks, it was a Confessor. *Is it her? I hope so.*

“Confessor, mildly use your energy to tell me everything about this girl.” The Confessor kept her face covered but the feel of her smooth hand was familiar to me. It was Niya. *I hope you feel my love for you.*

“Niya, it’s me.” I whispered as she got closer. She did not say anything except to answer the queen.

“This half-ling is an orphan that was raised in Narborim my Queen. There is no Essence within her.” The somber tone sent chills through me. *Why was Niya acting like this? Was it because of the Queen?*

“Very well. Half-ling you may join the others. But be warned, if you do not pass your training or you cause problems, I will have you sent to the Iron Pits.” She gave me a stern look, “I have eyes everywhere girl, don’t make me regret not killing you where you stand. Bad enough I had to kill that boy.” I tried to bow again, but I lost my balance again, “Someone teach this *thing* how to curtsy properly!” *Thing? Now the Queen insults me.*

ALWIN



SWEAT DRIPS FROM MY BROW AS I BLOCK ANOTHER PUNCH FROM PEKKA. Fighting helps me clear my mind keeps me focused on the mission. To save our world our people from the constant pursuit, and her. Since my last conversation with Odith, I have found myself thinking about Serena.

The need to know her grows greater each day. This is new and dangerous. I shouldn't want her like I do. A thick fist connects with my jaw making my mouth fill with my blood.

"Pay attention." Pekka spats.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Did you forget how to block?" I shoot him a smile.

"When did you know that Alina was your mate?" His face softened at my question.

"The moment I laid eyes on her something clicked between us. Like a broken bone snapping back into place. It was powerful and I immediately felt her Essence illuminate off her and combine with mine."

"Pekka, I didn't know you were a romantic."

"When it came to Alina, I was." He doesn't speak much of his late wife. Murdered for marrying a half-ling. I was too late to save them both, just like with Odith. That is why I continually watch Serena. I need to get to her before I fail again.

“Do you have a woman in mind?” he asks snapping me out of my thoughts.

“There is one.” I admit. Pekka seems shocked but he smiles.

“About damn time boy. I thought you played for the other side, which is completely fine if you do. You will seek no ill judgments from me. What her name? Is it Odith because I thought-”

“No. Its someone none of us have met yet but will soon.”

“What makes you think she is your mate?” When I look at her I long to touch her. Get to know her. But I won’t admit that aloud.

“I don’t know Pekka. I have only seen her through the reflection pool.”

“Another charge to be rescued.” He grunts, stretching before exiting the boxing ring. “You will know for sure once your eyes land on her.”

After the training session with Pekka, I make my way to the War Room. I am meeting with Braxor today. Upon entering, the tall auburn scaled dragon is already sitting on his haunches waiting for me. His long black horns shift with his large head as those two black eyes look down on me. Braxor stands fifty feet tall which is why the War Room is so grand. My friends need to be comfortable.

“How was your trip?” I ask while closing the door behind. Drakin is a long journey for those of us who cannot fly.

“Brief as per usual.” He answers in a deep tone. Braxor and I met when I was in my first century of life. He saved me the day my Mother was killed by my Father. Our bond hasn’t faltered since.

“The plans for the war are progressing. We will have the final piece in play soon.”

“You mean the phoenix?” he questions.

“Yes.” He lets out a gruff noise. “Where is the girl?” Braxor has known about Serena just as long as we have. Our future relies on her commitment in the war against the purebloods.

“In Galavian. I have sent Odith there to help persuade her to join us.”

“I don’t trust that girl.” He snarls. Odith and Braxor have never gotten along, and he has never told me why.

“Odith has been a longtime loyal friend to me just like you. I don’t understand your distain for her.”

“She reeks of betrayal and manipulation. “

“You can smell all that? I wonder what I smell like.” I mumble.

“An uptight virgin who takes everything so seriously. But today you also smell of something new.” He sniffs me and I back away feeling awkward. “Desire, lust, hmm has the Dark Prince found a mate?” he smirks.

“Why does everyone keep assuming I found a mate? I am trying to prepare us for war and all anyone can talk about is sex.” Braxor bursts out in a thundering cluster of laughter that shakes the room.

“It isnt funny Braxor I didn’t call you here to talk about me. I called you here so we can discuss your position in this fight.” His laughter subsides and he wipes the tears from his golden eyes.

“I apologize, yes we are to take the aerial pursuit I assume.”

“But you only use fire power if necessary. I don’t want to cause unnecessary bloodshed.”

“Its war Alwin. Death and blood come with it. You need to decide what future you want for the realm. Peace and unity, or just another usurper to take the throne.”

SERENA



AS I LEFT BEHIND MY UNPLEASANT ‘PRIVATE AUDIENCE’ IN THE PALACE, I took the stone path to Salma Hall. From the outside it looks intimidating but rightfully so. If I were to fail, I would be sent to work the Iron Pits. Plastered walls and marble details make up most of the building's outer structure. It is tough to see through the windows, but the intense pressure from within can be felt outside.

When I entered through the hard metallic doors, a blast of cool air wiped the sweat from my brows. On the inside, the walls seem barren and plain, nothing glamorous to look at. Nothing like the Galavian Palace. The foyer leads straight into the vast library, full of thousands of different books.

“If you are looking for the rest of the recruits, they went that way.” The annoyed tone coming from an older woman, sharp nose stuck in a book, pointed toward another set of metallic doors at the back of the library. *Can this place get anymore lavish?*

I hastily moved down the narrow halls, passing by each and every door until I finally reached the back of the group.

“This is where the humans will be staying, and this is where the Elves will be staying. Before you ask, yes, they are co-ed. That doesn’t mean you can frolic and play with each other.” His voice sounded annoyed. He must

have given this speech a dozen times already. Every year, a new batch of recruits flows in and out of these halls.

“Hey, what did I miss?” I tapped on the shoulder of the human girl in front of me hoping she would fill me in.

“Back off half-ling. You shouldn’t even be here.” Her snobby look sent a fire burning through me. Before I could retaliate, “Um, where does the half-ling sleep? Because she is not human or Elve she is an abomination. I suggest she sleeps with the hogs.” The entire group laughed, pointed, and stared at me. I could not hold my anger any longer. In a flash of rage, I was straddled on top of that girl connecting my burning fist with her Caucasian face.

“Get off her, you are going to kill her.” I was thrust back off the girl while she laid unconscious. Blood leaking from her broken nose and busted lip.

“She started it.” I said regretting the immaturity of my voice. Everyone was standing there, in awe looking at me with fear in their eyes. I ran, I ran so far, I did not know where I was going. I settled down next to the lake tears welling in my eyes.

“What is wrong with me?!” I hit my fist in the water. The blood seeping into it like little red ribbons. “Abomination, thing, insult after insult! I cannot take it anymore! Who am I! What is wrong with me?” I screamed towards the sky, angry at the Ancients for sparing my infant life.

“Nothing my dear.” I jumped and turned around to see a shadowed figure appear right before me.

“Who are you?” Wearing a black hood over themselves, to hide their identity no doubt.

“I am just like you. There is nothing the matter with who we are.”

“What? Where did you come from? Are you a teacher here?” I could not see her, but her sly voice and womanly features gave me an eerie feeling.

“I am what you call an Iluminate. I control The Moon Tarot.” I gulped my rising fear down. “My dear girl, there is no need to be afraid,” she uncovered herself. Revealing her pointed ears and nose. All other features were pure human. “You see, I am a half-ling too. My Human features are more pronounced than my Elve. But we are one in the same. Just like our Essence.” She smiled at me.

“No, I do not have Essence.” Her mouth was full of teeth as white as the snow on the ground.

“Every half-ling is born with a certain type of Essence. Yours may be related to fighting, anger, and rage.” Hearing her voice speak was lighting that same fire I felt before. *Anger, rage, the burning sensation to punch her in the face.* “I can feel yours now. You want to fight me. Kill me even.”

“Get out of my head.”

“You are too weak and untrained to keep anyone from being in your head. Now I can teach you. You can learn from me all the ways of the Warrior. All that built up rage and anger can be let out without hurting anyone.”

“How?” Her pink, short hair softly hangs over a beautiful face. Barely hiding her darting purple eyes, with pink irises that glare at me with intrigue. Fair blue skin elegantly compliments her cheekbones and nose. There is something ambiguous about her, perhaps it is a feeling of seduction or perhaps it is simply her familiarity.

“You can feel it, I am just like you.”

“How is that possible? I was told there are no others like me because Human and Elves are not permitted to bed with each other.”

“Oh Serena, there is so much I could teach you. So much more. He could answer all your questions without even thinking about it.” *He? Who was she talking about? How does she know my name?*

“Who are you talking about? How do you know my name?” I anxiously awaited her answer. A slight smirk came across her face before speaking.

“Alwin, he is my savior, and he can be yours too.” *Where have I heard that name before?* “Think about what I said. I can take you away from here and we can go to Alwin together.” She smiled a seemingly fake smile.

“I will think about it.” Her fake smile turned into a legitimate grin of sinful delight.

“My name is Odith. I will be seeing you again Serena.” She faded into the misted air and I kept thinking about everything she told me. *How did she know my name?*



BACK IN THE rear end of the hall, I found myself sitting in front of the Essence Master’s desk. It was about the fight. She was either going to send me to the Iron Pits or have me killed. *Maybe I should have taken up Odith’s offer.* I have been a prisoner all my life. Hiding within the musty walls of Narborim waiting to be free. The clanking of heels coming from behind me, tensed my muscles up with anxiety.

“Miss Serena, it isn’t customary for my recruits to behave violently on the first day.” A slim figure dressed in a tight-fitting black dress sat across from me.

“If you would allow me to explain” she put a hand up gesturing me to stop my babbling.

“I understand perfectly my dear.” Her rose gold spectacles sat at the end of her pointed nose. *Full-blooded Elve* “You are an outsider looking for a place to fit. I am here to tell you to stop looking. There are no other half-lings in this world. You are the only inbred of your liking. Now, you must choose.” *Choose? What did she mean?*

“You are neither Elve nor Human, but you have the ability to choose which side you would like to convert to.”

“I don’t understand.” She was not making any since. *How can they convert me to one half that makes me whole?*

“Do you know what powers a Master like myself can possess?” I shook my head no. I sat intensely listening as her words drew me in like the ocean tugging at the tides. “I have the ability to converge you. You can expel the unwanted half of you and become whole to one species.”

“You mean, I wouldn’t be a half-ling anymore?” *Interesting.*

“Precisely.” Her wicked smile made me sick.

“What would happen to my other half?”

“Dead. The other half would cease to exist. You would me morphed into whichever species you see fit. This may be my biased opinion, but I would go for the Human half. Making rounded ears pointy can be pretty painful.”



AS I SANK down in my cotton bed, I thought about the conversation I had with the Master. *Convergence. So far, I have two choices to make: go with Odith and learn from her Master or stay here and become a whole human or Elve. Oh, Mother what should I do?* I prayed every night since the death or kidnaping of my Mother. Waiting for her to answer me in any way she could. I cannot imagine being anything other than myself. *I must find out why Alwin’s name sounds so familiar to me. Then and only then will I decide.*



MORNING CAME, my night of sleep was restless with the two intense conversations running through my mind all night. Breakfast was some

boiled eggs, sliced bacon, and freshly squeezed goat's milk. I never had anything so delicious.

In Narborim, all we ate was fish and fish eggs. It was quite disgusting after a while. I sat alone because of course no one wanted to befriend the half-ling. Mostly, they all just stared and gossiped about the way I looked. It was making me want to take the Master up on her offer. Or even creepy Odith.

After breakfast, I scampered off to the library to research this name and the true meaning of convergence.

"Excuse me," I said to the back of a tall, greyed haired Elven Woman. Turning around, her rose gold spectacles did not hide the annoyance in her eyes. *Does everyone wear rose gold specs here? Or is it an old elve thing?*

"May I ask you a question?" She just stood there, giving me a blank stare, "Does the name *Alwin* ring any bells?" her annoyed expression went instantly to panic.

"What did you just say?" slowly taking her glasses off and slamming her book closed sending dust particles in the air.

"Alwin? Have you heard of him?"

"We do not speak of the *Dark Elve* within these walls. I could have you arrested just for asking me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." *Dark Elve?*

"Of course, you didn't. You are a stupid little half-ling." Her insults stabbed at me like a knife. That fire was burning to be released again. I took some shallow breaths and held it in with all my strength. "Get out of my library before I report you."

I did as I was told and left the crude librarian to her books. I thought about Niya only she could make me feel better than I do right now. I thought of a way to contact her. But it was a loss. Due to her busy schedule and tending to the Queen, she had no time for letters or visitors. I miss the sweet smell of her cherry blossom perfume.

“Serena,” a whispered voice echoed down the vacant halls, “Psst, Serena come here.” I looked behind me and saw her.

“Niya?” I said with the biggest smile on my face. “What are you doing here?” she pulled me into a small storage closet. “Why are we hiding?”

“I needed to see you and explain things.” I touched her soft cheek. The feelings I had for her were trying to explode but I suppressed them. “We cannot be seen speaking to one another.”

“But why? You and I grew up together.”

“Because. I am a Confessor, and you are a half-ling.” Hearing her say that word, *half-ling* made my heart hurt. “Serena,” she gazed into my eyes, with a sense of longing, and my heart felt like it was going to burst.

“Niya, tell me. I can tell there is something going on. I can handle it believe me.” I reached out and grabbed her hands. I felt her energy flowing through me. It was warm, peaceful, loving.

“You cannot go through with the convergence.” She pulled away from me. Her words and actions stunning me. “I’m sorry but this will be the last time you ever see me. I need you to trust me when I beg you not to go through with it.” I sensed the pleading in her voice.

“Niya,” she pressed a finger to my lips, cupped my chin and kissed me softly. The feel of her soft lips upon mine sent a tingling sensation through me. I pulled her closer as my tongue reached the slit between her lips. She resisted me and pulled away with tears running down her cheeks.

“I love you, Serena. My love for you will lead you out of the darkest places.”

I felt her drift from my grip and disappear between the shadows. *She kissed me. She loves me. I knew it.*

I barely remembered anything. Our entire conversation went out the window the moment we kissed. I felt her energy surging through me. I know she did not want to stop and neither did I. Confessor’s are forbidden to love especially loving a half-ling.

My mind was racing over the events of the last week. Leaving my home, meeting the Queen from hell, two strangers offering to “help me”, and kiss from the girl I loved ever since we were children. I figured, if I tried to wind down, and think about everything, the answers, would just pop up. I was wrong. Niya’s words echoed in my head. ‘*Don’t do the convergence,*’ she sounded terrified. Afraid for my life. I wish I could see her again.

She does not want me to change who I am. Even if it means we cannot be together. I decided to go back to the lake and call out to Odith. If I cannot converge and I cannot join the Queens Guard as a half-ling, then I am leaving.

“Odith,” I called out in a hushed tone. She never did tell me how to contact her again. “Odith, I summon thee?” *That sounds so stupid.* I palmed the embarrassment flooding my face.

“Serena,” I jumped at the sound of her behind me. “Jumpy, are we? The Master can help with that.”

“Odith, I need to ask you a couple of questions before I agree to leave with you.” A somber nod told me to go ahead. “Do you know about convergence?”

Her cheerful smile quickly faded. “It is a dark and painful practice. Why?”

“The Essence Master offered it to me so I could join the Queens Guard and not be thrown in the Iron Pitts.”

“I see. Well convergence literally rips your soul in-half. The side you choose stays, but it is weak and barely even a soul anymore.”

“Why would she offer something like that to me?” we were walking and talking around the beautiful glass lake. The Moon glistened in on its own reflection.

“Because the way her and your Queen see it, you are a threat to them. They want to destroy you. And if that means ripping you a part to do it,

then so be it.”

“And you think Master Alwin can help me? Save me?” she let out a sigh before stopping to answer me.

“Serena, if you stay here, you will end up dead, half-dead, or in prison. I am offering you a way out. A way to be free amongst me and my people.”

“There are others like us?”

“Not so much half-human half elfe, but there are other Half-lings.”

“Is your Master a Halfling?”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” she smiled, trying to coax me into leaving with her. Niya’s words echoed in my head once again. I grabbed the reached-out hand and was whisked away into a whirlwind of purple and pink. Energy flowed through me as we spun inside a portal. I have heard about them, only the most powerful Essence can conjure one up. They use *The Moon card* at night, when the Moon is at its highest peak, the perfect time to tune in on all that power.

ALWIN



THE THUNDERING IN MY CHEST AND SWEATING OF MY PALMS COMES AS I watch Odith, and Serena enter the portal. She chose to come here gods, why am I so nervous? What will she think of me and this place? Calm down Alwin. I tell myself. She is coming to learn to help. I need to find out what Odith has told her before I ask her to join our fight.

Once they arrive, it will take about an hour or so for them to get here. Rose will need to ensure her quarters are perfect and I need to call a meeting.

“Rose,” I said as the half-pixie fluttered by. “Please call the council to the War Room and prepare Miss Ozarks room. She will be arriving soon and everything needs to be perfect.”

“As you command.” Rose stated with a bow. I hated when she treated me like that. Bowing before me that is what my Father made all his subjects do. I maybe a Prince, but I am nothing like my Father. He was a tyrant and ruthless King of our people . The reason the peace within Xora was destroyed. I may have his power within me, but I also have my Mothers.

She was good, loyal, pure and that is why he killed her. As the doors opened and the council members flooded in, I took my seat.

“The phoenix is on her way. We need to be weary of any conversations we have with her. Talk of her power and the war will come from me and only me. The girl has been scared her entire life. We all know how that feels. I want you to welcome her with open arms. Council her and train her, even if she doesn’t know the true reason.” There was silence which usually came after a speech like that. They would all obey my orders, just like any other time.

“Is she really going to bring peace to the realm? Kill the Gnaxtor King and usurper Queen?” Lena asked.

“I don’t know if it will come to that. Both sides know about the legend of the Phoenix, if they get word that we have her on our side, then perhaps we won’t need to go to war.”

“Here, Here.” Pekka cheered and the rest followed suit.

“Thank you my friends. The meeting is adjourned.”

Back in my room, I found myself pacing in anticipation. Gods I am never like this. What is wrong with me she is just a girl. Someone I haven’t even met yet. The sound of knocking came at my door and then it opened.

“They are in the War Room.” Rose stated.

“Thank you.” I followed her out and as she went left I ventured right. Slipping in through the shadows, my eyes instantly land on her and my pulse quickens. I feel it and hear it at the same time. The sound of a bone snapping into place. She is my mate, and I cannot believe it.

SERENA



ON THE OTHER SIDE, THE WORLD WAS AN IRIDESCENT LIGHT OF BLUE AND gold. My eyes squinted while adjusting to the luminescent glare of the sky. A cool breeze flurried around them, shaking the marigold leaves from the forest floor.

“Where are we?”

“Welcome to Ermlon Forest.” Odith said with a smile. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Enchanting.”

“Come on. I will take you to the castle.” *They have a castle. Who is this guy?*

The walk was anything but boring. It was as if the forest was alive and wanted to show us, golden mushrooms, glowing rose bushes, and whistling winds. The echoing of mockingbirds filled my ears with a sweet sound. The smell was natural and like a dozen flowers were blooming all at once.

“Have you lived here all your life?” I wanted to get to know her better. Part of it was curiosity and the other, was well....

“Unfortunately, no.” she said as she continued to guide me up a hill. “When I was sixteen years old, my Mother and Father were killed for having me. And my lover was killed for being with me. The Gnaxtor came for me, but Alwin got to me before they did.”

“I’m sorry.” Something we have in common other than our being half-lings and a lover being killed. I was never that brave to show my affections for Niya.

“I have had time to grieve. Alwin took me in and cared for me. Showed me how to use my Essence to control my tarot cards.”

“Does everyone with Essence control these cards?” a small laugh came from her, and I could not help but feel anxious.

“You poor child. No. Only certain powers can control the cards.” I gave her a worried look. “Don’t worry, if you have Essence, you will find out if you can control the cards.”

We continued to walk for another hour or so. Odith informed me of her childhood with Alwin. He must be old, seeing as she is twenty-five. He taught her how to control her Essence and use it to Conjure.

“There are rules,” she said, “If you manipulate or misuse the cards, they work against you.”

“Has anyone ever tried that before?” she went quiet, and it worried me.

“There has never been nor, will there ever be someone with that kind of power. It takes a serious amount of control just to conjure. In order to manipulate the cards and make them do what you want, you would have to be a god.”

“But, has anyone ever tried?” she just put her hand up and shook her head no. my eyes followed her pink hand as she pointed to a vast fortress.

“Welcome, to Ermlon Castle.” It was a colossal of stone towers connected by high walls lined with armed sentries. The black banners were emblazoned with silver phoenixes’ and danced with the wind. Steel lanterns were mounted to each pole to cast a luminescent glow over the fortress.

A grand archway was engraved with the phrase *non obstante quod lux venit cum nubibus* “The light will come despite the clouds.” It was a beautiful saying. Inspirational even.

The iron bars lifted as we approached, and the two guards posted straighten their posture as Odith and I walked by. The courtyard was busy with noise. It appeared many different creatures were here training, some eating, and other socializing.

“Do they all live here?”

“Some live in the Castle but the others have their own homes down in the town.” There were Elves, Dwarves, Pixies, and even Humans. “Each one of those you see, are a half-ling. Casted out and hunted by Purebreds.”

“Purebreds?”

“All Human or All Elve.” *Next time I am going to call that girl a Purebred. Does not seem like an insult though, does it?* We entered through a small door frame that led us down a narrow corridor. It was barren except some torches to light the darkened halls. “Alwin is waiting for us in the War Room.”

We entered through large wooden doors with two handles shaped like a phoenix. A round table was at the center with what appeared to be a drawing of the world. *Narborim, Galavian, and so many other places.* “Is this all of Xora?”

“All of what we know of.” I glided my fingers over the textured surface. I never knew our world was this big before.

“Where are you from?” Odith stopped in her tracks and quickly kneeled down. I was confused until I felt it. The slow breath coming from behind me. “Sneaking up on someone isn’t the proper way to introduce yourself to them.” As soon as I said it, I regretted it. Or maybe I did not?

A hand brushed my shoulder, my heart was beating out of rhythm, when I turned around, and I saw him. Slick black hair pulled back into a bun. Blue iris’s danced within his gray-skinned face as he examined me from above. He was standing about two inches taller than me, and his face was plain. Handsome but plain.

“Welcome Serena,” his voice was cold, dark, deep. Appropriate for a man of his age.

“Hi,” that is all I could muster up. Out of my entire vernacular the Old Father would be ashamed. *Foolish child*. That is what he called me when I was being ignorant. I cleared my throat, I wanted to step back from him, but I was paralyzed.

“Odith, darling you may go.” I did not move, but out of the corner of my eye I could see a glimpse of pink hair pass me and heard the sound of the doors creak as they opened and closed. “So,” he started as he stepped away from me. I finally let out the breath in which I was holding.

My eyes followed him as he circles the map, “Do you know who I am?” his broad shoulders and brooding face were making me weak in my knees. I feel anxious and I do not know why.

“Alwin,” I answered trying to hide the stutter of my voice. “Odith said...” before I could finish, he was close to me again. This time mere inches away from me. I could see the rise and fall of his chest with each inhale and exhale. There was something captivating about him.

“Odith said what?” he looked at me with those icy blue eyes.

“You would be able to help me.” He leaned in and I thought for sure he was going to attempt to kiss me, he stepped aside.

“We shall see.” Then he was gone. Like a ghost in the night. Here and gone again. I was left standing, alone, confused, and wondering *what in the hell just happened*.

“Come with me.” A guard appeared behind me and his voice made me jump.

“Who are you?” my question did not seem to faze him for his automated stare stayed the same. “Where are we going?”

“He is escorting you to your chambers.”

“Odith, glad to see a familiar face.” She smiled as she approached me.

“So, you’re meeting with Alwin went well.” How do you know?

“Did it? He seems...”

“Intimidating?”

“No.” Yes.

“He means well. You will start your testing tomorrow.” I shot her a worried glance. “Calm yourself, you will do fine.”

“What if I fail? I have no place to go.”

“Alwin will let you stay here regardless. If you do not have Essence, then you will still train to become a warrior.”

“Why is he building an army?”

“He is trying to stop the ones that want us dead. To make Xora a safer place for everyone that is like us.” Before I realized it, we had walked all the way to the door that led into my bed chambers. “I promise you will know everything soon enough.” She gave a respectful bow and then opened the door.

On the inside, a large canopy hung over a small bedframe. The sheets were lined with white cotton linen. The room was not grand, but small enough for one person. In the corner, a bath was drawn, and night clothes laid out for me to dress in.

I sank down into that warm bath water. My feet were screaming at me for the journey that the day had on them. I sipped on some jasmine tea leaves and just let my body soak in all the heat. *Niya, I miss you. I wish I could see you again.* My thoughts went to her. The girl I grew to know and love. Her kiss still lingering upon my lips.

Morning came with a loud knock upon my door. I blinked the sun out of my eyes as a blonde-haired pixie half-ling came in and opened my curtains.

“Good morning, I guess.” Her face was stern.

“The Master would like you to dress and be down in the War Room within the hour.”

“Um, okay thank you I guess.” She nodded her head at me and fluttered away. On my dresser, I saw a blue blouse embellished with golden lace. A small phoenix was embroidered on each shoulder. It was the most beautiful piece of fabric I had ever laid my eyes on.

Accompanied with this blouse, was black pants, and boots. I fashioned my hair into two braids but let my loose ends cover my ears. It is something I have done all my life to hide who I am from judgmental eyes.

I ate my breakfast which was fruit and boiled eggs. The apples were unbelievably delicious. I could have eaten more if I were allowed. After filling my belly, a servant came and picked the dirty dishes, and I made my way to the War Room.

I think it was this way. Of course, I would get lost on my first day.

“A little lost, are we?” my thoughts were interrupted by Odith once again.

“You sure do know how to get around undetected, don’t you?” she smiled at me. It made me blush and I did not know why.

“It is one of my many powers. I can make myself invisible.” *I don’t know if she is being sarcastic or not.* She let out a laugh and before I knew it, we both were locking arms laughing down the hall and into the War Room.

It was nice to make a new friend. I have not laughed like that since my last day with Niya. Then my mood went from happy to sour in just one memory. “Did you sleep well?”

That brooding smooth voice made me focus again. “Very well thank you. Probably the best sleep I have ever had.” He was standing right in front of me again, *how does he move so fast?*

“You seem nervous Serena. There is no need to be. You are safe here.” He reached out his hand and I felt myself shrink down just a little. I felt his skin brush against mine sending an electrical pulse through my body. “You do not need to hide your true self here.”

He brushed my hair behind my ears and cupped my face, so my eyes met his. My heart was beating again. I was feeling something inside of me, which I had never felt before except when Niya kissed me. “What are you doing to me?”

No answer, I started to feel myself struggle to move from his grip, but my body was like stone. The electrical feeling soon turned into fear, and I heard myself screaming. And then, it happened. I felt the heat all around me and saw the embers reflecting back in his eyes. A small smile formed on his lips, and he let me go. My body falls but it does not contact the floor. Then, the room was black as I felt the strong arms of Alwin scoop me up. The last thing I heard was “We will be in my chambers...”

When I came to, I saw a black canopy above me. And felt velvet blankets over me. I sat up, looking around, trying to figure out where I was. The room was so dark, I started to panic.

“Calm down.” I looked toward the direction of his voice, “You will make yourself pass out again.”

“What happened?”

“What do you remember?”

“I remember you holding me, heat, and then nothing.” He approached me and sat at the edge of the bed. “You don’t know what personal space is do you?”

He smiled and I felt my heart jump. *Stop it. You cannot fall for a guy you just met. Plus, he is like a billion years old.* “We have discovered your Essence.”

“Wait. No. I do not have magic. I am a useless half-ling...” before I could continue, he places a finger to my lips. Even the slightest touch sends a pulse through me.

“You are anything but useless. You have the Phoenix Fire.”

“What?”

“Did your Old Father not teach you about it?”

“I mean, it may have been mentioned but it was just a myth.”

“The *Phoenix Fire* is the most powerful of all Essence. Only certain people can wield this magic.” I was listening to him speak but I still was not believing a word he was saying. “So, you coming here was probably the best decision. If our enemies got word of you, you would be manipulated into destroying all of us.”

“What do you mean? Are you a half-ling too?” he scooted closer to me, brushed the hair behind my ears again. There it was the pulse surging through me. We were inches away from each other, one small movement and our lips would meet.

“I am half-elf and half-pixie. That is why I can move quickly. I have the speed and stealth of a pixie.” He whispered those words into my ear, placed a hand on my hip, and I was sure he was going to take me for his. I wanted it, but then I was not sure I wanted it. His neck was so close to me, I fought the urge to kiss it.

“I think I need to leave.” I got up before anything else happened and the surge left with the distance between us. He nodded his head and then led me to the door.

“Serena,” I looked at his half-disappointed face, “please do not think me as too forward. I can come on strong in certain situations.”

“You did nothing wrong. I am a big girl and can take care of myself. But I have just met you.” I wanted to say plus you are old, and I am in love with someone else. This was nothing but pure lust. That is the only logical explanation for me being so weak around him. I have never shared a bed with anyone and Niya was my first kiss.

“We will start your training tomorrow.” He smiled and I quickly left his chambers and headed into my own. I slumped down into my bed. My body and mind exhausted from the events of the days. *You have Phoenix Fire* those words echoed in my head. How is it possible? During times like this, I clenched my Mother’s amulet tightly and prayed to her. I do not

know if she is dead or alive, I just know that when I hold this star, I feel her love and all my worry goes away in that moment.

The next morning, and mornings after, the same pixie girl came and went. Leaving fresh clothes and fresh food. She took my dirty linens and laid my breakfast out before me.

“What is your name?” she did not stop at my question, so I grabbed her arm. “Please, if you are tending to my mess, I must know who you are.”

“I am called Rose.”

“That is a beautiful name. And are you half-pixie half-human?” she blushed when I asked.

“Yes. Now please let go of me so I can get back to work.” I released my grip on her wrist. They were petite, my thumb and index finger touched at the center. She was as beautiful as her name. Blonde hair, purple eyes, and her skin was pale tone probably from her human half. Her wings were tucked in, but when the light hit them, they shimmered like the stars in the sky. *I cannot believe I am attracted to another one. What is wrong with me?*



A LESSON with Pekka will clear my mind. Pekka was a tall, Dwarf half-ling. The height was the only human thing about him. His red beard, scraggly hair, and brute strength was all Dwarf.

“Well, let’s begin today with some hand-to-hand combat.” His deep Northern accent was difficult to understand at times, but after a week here, I was starting to make out his words. “Serena, I would like you to demonstrate what you have learned this week.”

I could not see my own face, but the others started to snicker at the obvious fear on my face I bore.

“Don’t you think someone else should...okay.” He pointed his big burly finger at the mat, and I waited for him to choose my assailant. He scanned the class, no one stepped up, I was not sure why. I was hardly strong enough nor skilled enough to beat anyone. “I am looking for a volunteer.”

“Allow me,” the entire courtyard got on one knee as Alwin made his way toward the ring. “On your feet. You can’t watch a fight from the ground.” As he walked, he removed his black shirt off to reveal his defined muscles. My eyes followed each deepened line that outline his chest, abs, and shoulders. The memory of those arms around me sent a hot flash through me.

“Are you ready?” I raised my hands and got into a fighting position. “Very good. Let us begin.”

In a flash, a big grey fist was heading straight towards my face, but I must have retained something because I was able to dodge it and sweep his feet from underneath him. He made a loud grunt as he hit the ground. The crowd gasped at the sight of him on the stone floor.

“Stay down.” I heard myself say it, but I did not believe it. He got to his feet, wiped the sweat from his brow, and bucked up to me. We engaged again, this time he caught me and slammed me hard against the floor. He pinned my arms down by gripping my wrist and straddled himself on top of my waist. I struggled to get free, but he leaned down and whispered in my ear, “I usually like my girls on top.”

A furious heat burned through me, I did not know if it was jealousy at those other girls or rage, but I was engulfed in flames again, but did not feel the burn. I was unconscious mere seconds after. Just like last time, I woke up in Alwin’s bed chambers.

“If you wanted in my bed, all you needed to do was ask.”

“I don’t want to be in your bed. I want to know why this keeps happening to me.” He approached me; this time I did not let him get close

to me. I jumped to the other side of the bed “Stay away from me.”

“Serena, I am not going to hurt you.”

“I don’t think you are going to hurt me Alwin. You are the reason I keep passing out. Every time you touch me, it happens.” He laughed at me. That gorgeous smile, I hated the way it made my stomach flip. I was attracted to him, but I did not want to be.

“You pass out because every time you get angry, you use your power, and it weakens you. You have to build your strength up. The more you use it, the stronger you will get.” That makes sense.

“What about when you touch me?” he approached me, slowly, each step forward, I took a step back until I was up against the wall.

“What do you mean? What happens when I touch you?” he got close to me, leaned in close enough, but not touching.

“I need to leave.” He leaned in, he brushed my hair behind my ears, and I felt it again. “Stop.” He lifted his hand off me.

“I will bid you goodnight Serena.” He backed away. My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to jump out of my chest. His back was to me, something told me not to leave yet. I grabbed him, pinned him against the wall and kissed him.

I was not sure if he was going to kiss me back until I felt his arms around me, lifting me off the ground, it was intense. His hands around my waist as he set me on the bed. Something inside me told me to stop. “I need to go.”

In between breathless kisses, I pushed him back. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, but this is too fast.” I planted one soft kiss on his cheek, bid him goodnight, and left.

What was I thinking? Kissing him like that. What would Niya think? She said she was not going to see me again. I do not care, and I cannot wait around for something to happen that is not going to. I made a vow to

get Niya out of my mind and focus on me. Embrace my powers and everything about me. Alwin woke something inside me, it felt good, powerful, I wanted more. I wanted him because he wanted me.

ALWIN



SHE KISSED ME.

Pulled me into her and pressed those tantalizing lips against mine. It wasn't a soft kiss like a peck on the cheek from my Mother. It was all consuming and the shield I formed around my heart melted. She doesn't realize it yet, but we are fated mates. The tension will grow between us if I don't do something quick.

I need her to focus on her training and not me. Leaving for a while should help take me out of the picture. A month should do just fine, and I can watch her progression through the reflection pool in Drakin.

"Don't tell anyone where I am going and why I have left." I told Odith as she summoned a portal. "Especially Serena."

"Why?"

"She needs to focus on training. I have business to attend to in Drakin. I trust you to watch over her and befriend her while I am gone."

"Of course." She shifted as the swirls of pinks and purples circled before us. "Why does she keep passing out when she uses her powers?"

If I tell her the truth and say it aloud, then it becomes real.

"We are fated mates Odith. The longer she denies any feelings she has for me and doubts her power, the longer she will black out. I need her to focus on her Essence and not me. That is more important than any bond we

will ever have.” Before she could say anything, I jumped through the portal and landed with a grunt on the other side.

“Alwin, what a delightful surprise.” Braxor’s voice came from behind me.

Turning I see that I have landed in the middle of the training yard. I have been to Drakin Fortress several times, but I am always amazed at the sound structure the dragons have morphed it into. A once dormant volcano now houses the dragons of the realm. They do not have towers, no need for walls, there is no threat to this kingdom. Dragons have long sense been extinct in the minds of the Gnaxtor and Galavian rulers. Most likely because they have been focused on ridding the world o anything not pure.

Shooting to the sky behind him is a large black volcano with a vast whole carved into the bottom. Compared to the dragons, I am but a speck of dust on a map. There isn’t much else to this land besides the ash covered ground and dry heat, to which my shadows can protect me from. The perfect place for dragons to live.

“Braxor I need a favor. “He looks inquisitively down at me.

“You seek sanctuary?” He questions.

“Only for a month. I need to take time away from Ermlon. If it isn’t too much to ask.” The dragon ponders my request.

“Fine but I need an explanation you know we don’t welcome others so easily without reason and seeing as you are not bruised or bleeding, I’d say you didn’t come here leaving a fight.” That is the thing about Braxor, he is wise and observant.

“Should we go somewhere...private?” I ask as I notice other dragons start to make their appearance. Each of them a variety of assorted colors, shapes, and sizes. Even the little ones could swallow me in one bite.

He didn’t answer, just waited for me to speak. Letting out a sigh, rubbing the back of my neck, I am nervous again.

“I have found my mate.” I said with some relief. Braxor still didn’t say anything waiting for another more reasonable answer for my seeking sanctuary. “It is the Phoenix, and she is at Ermlon”

“I see. There is no real threat bringing you here besides your own stupidity. Has she rejected you?”

“She doesn’t know.”

“Why are you telling me and not her?”

“Because I am a danger to her. When she uses her powers around me or touches me while using them, she passes out. If I am away, she can focus more on that than anything we have.”

“Alwin,” he softly states. “You need to tell her and let her decide for herself what is more important. We need the Phoenix yes, but maybe being with her will help her become stronger. Did you think of that?”

Truth be told I didn’t.

“I have made my decision. If you let me stay here, I can help. I also need to keep my own training up and will watch over her, with your permission of course, through your reflection pool.”

“Escort Master Alwin to some type of quarters suitable for a man. You do realize we dragons do not sleep in rooms on soft beds. We prefer the soft ashes from the old volcano.” The ground is covered in it.

As we make our way through a hollowed-out entrance at the bottom of the volcano, I take in my surroundings. It is all obsidian stone the heat is not as unbearable as I imagined it would be. Using my own magic to cast my shadows helps shield me from it.

There are no bedrooms, but in a smaller bizarre whole a room is prepared.

“Can you conjure your own bed? Or would you like the King to do it?” A shorter, all-black, young dragon asked.

“I think I can manage thank you.” The youngling disappeared as I whisked up a bed using the incantation Mother taught me when I was a

child. Not all Essence requires the use of Tarot Cards. I am not a master and have never had the desire to become one. The truth is, I am afraid at what I will become if I try.

My Father didn't just use shadow magic to tear apart Xora, he used the Ancient Deck gifted by Master Vincent himself. Manipulating the cards, twisting, and turning the honorable practice morphing it into something to be feared. I won't go down the same dark path as him.

With each passing day, I start a routine. Wake in the morning, go for a run with my shadows shielding me from the atmosphere. Eat a breakfast of charred meat, never asked which kind, and go on about the day.

Braxor created makeshift punching bag, formed from goose feathers and fabrics that the younglings fetched from the different territories. Allowing me to keep up on my fighting skills. Usually after a training session, he would join me at the reflection pool to watch over Serena.

At the center front of the mountain, a stone circle with the only water for miles sits glistening in the rays of the sun. Due to the vast ocean connecting the realm, water is a resource we are all privy to.

"She is becoming stronger every day. You should be proud." Braxor murmured.

"She is and I am." something caught my eyes as I looked upon her and Odith sparring in the ring. A dark shadow casted itself around her. "Do you see that?"

I asked as I pointed.

"An Omen." Braxor stated. "Serena is in danger; you must return to her. She hasn't embraced her true form and will be too weak to face whatever threatens her."

Rushing out of the room, Braxor's wing shoots out to stop me. "Beware of Odith Alwin. Something isn't right with that girl."

Pushing past his wing I move through the caverns until I am in the yard again. Calling out to Odith, a moment passes before a portal of purple

and pink forms in front of me. Looking back, I see a line of dragons and at the center is my friend who bows his head in respect.

SERENA



THE NEXT MORNING, I WAS FEELING HAPPIER THAN I HAVE EVER BEEN. MY thoughts were only on training to become a better soldier. The kiss from last night helped. *It wasn't just a kiss, and you know it.*

"You seem rather chipper this morning?" I didn't realize that I was smiling when Odith sat down next to me. "I thought after yesterday you would be in your usually sour mood. What changed?" *Alwin and I made out.* That's what I wanted to say.

"I think I am ready to embrace all this. Tell me everything you know about the Phoenix Fire." She gave me a suspicious glance but didn't push me any further.

"Well, it was said that the Phoenix Fire is only given to the most powerful beings. It is a blessing and a curse. If you can't control it, the power will consume you. Into the Dark Phoenix."

"How do I learn to control it?"

"First, you need to start small. I would say practice lighting torches or candles and then gradually move up to campfires, and eventually buildings." She sounded more excited than I was. "Listen, Alwin will not let you lose control. When I was struggling, he was there for me through everything. I learned not only how to control my power but use it to conjure my first portal." *What else happened between you too?*

I swallowed my rising jealousy. We aren't exclusive so I cannot assume a man of his stature is a virgin. "Odith, have you and Alwin ever.... you know?" I made a gesture and she just busted out laughing at me. "What?"

"Are you serious? Me and that lump of muscle? No," she stepped behind me, brushed her lips and whispered in my ear, "I prefer women." I jumped when she slapped me on my butt.

"Oh," I said blushing, "I didn't mean to..."

"Of course, I am single. The pixie half-ling left me about a month ago. Said she couldn't handle my Essence."

"I'm sorry to hear that." We paused for a moment, "so, tell me more." She went on to tell me all about the legend of the Phoenix Fire. It was gifted by the Ancient Ones that forged a fire out of the ashes from the first bird.

"It is said that when it is time for a phoenix to pass on, they will burst into flames and turn into ash. They are reborn again in that ash."

"How is it that I possess such power?"

"When the first phoenix passed, the Ancient Ones took those ashes and blood from the reformed and consumed it." I shuddered at the thought of them drinking ash and blood. "Many of them died, but the one that survived was able to control the fire."

"Why is it such a rare power to possess?"

"Because, it hasn't been seen since the first Ancient." I looked down at the ground, trying to remember everything she just told me, "You are the first we have seen in centuries. And you are the first half-ling to possess such an Ancient power. You give us hope." The somber look in her purple eyes made me nervous.

"It feels like a heavy burden. Why do you think it took so long for me to be able to use it?"

“Well, I didn’t know I had Essence until Alwin came for me. It isn’t always dormant, and it can be for some others. Pekka didn’t discover his powers until around your age too.”

“What about Alwin? How old is he?”

“I don’t really know. But he was raised by someone. He isn’t much older than us but somehow he is immortal.”

“Do you think it is because he is half-pixie?” we looked at each other and laughed at the thought.

“Pixies live an immortal life that is true, but I don’t know why he doesn’t age.” We continued to talk for hours. It was nice having a friend to talk to and laugh with. Niya was that for me growing up. But she isn’t here now, and I won’t ever see her again.

The library was glorious. Shelves upon shelves of books chalked full of information. I was happy to study and train. Over the course of a month, I trained hard, and I felt stronger and faster than I ever did before I got here. My control was flourishing. I could light a candle without passing out.

“Very good little one. Now let’s see if you can defend yourself without your powers.” Pekka was always pushing me to be better. His lessons were hard, but I kept more than I gave myself credit. When he tried to sweep my feet, I was faster and punched him right in the gut.

“I am a fast learner.” I smiled. He didn’t return the smile but nodded and bowed in respect. I looked onto the courtyard. My eyes were trying to find him. The one who kissed me with so much passion it burned and left a mark. I hadn’t seen or heard from him since that night. Every time I asked someone where he was, I was told something different.

“Where is Alwin?”

“He is out on a mission. Should be back soon. Which is good because he will want to see your progress.” Odith was proud of me. She practiced and studied with me all the time.

Each morning after breakfast she came for me, we ran the grounds which I enjoyed because I could admire the beauty of the forest. Narborim was never this enchanting. After our run, we meet in the training yard with Pekka.

“Class, today we practice strikes and blocks.” Pekka loudly exclaimed. There was always a class of twenty students. “Simultaneously.”

“Don’t worry Serena, you will do fine.” Odith said as she patted my back. Odith is a skilled fighter and she never wanted to spar with anyone other than me. I didn’t mind entirely because the others seemed liked they were too afraid to talk to me.

“On the matts in position. Begin.” Holding my hands to block my face, Odith came at me with her right fist which I blocked with my left forearm while thrusting my knee upward into her abdomen. It didn’t seem to faze her as she shot me a smile when her left hook went straight toward my chin knocking my head back sending a ringing through my ears.

Spitting out my blood, I charged forward. Our bodies interlocking as we wrestled each other to the ground. I have her pinned down and think I won but was a fool to let my guard down because she flipped us.

“Don’t let your guard down Serena. Not for one second.” She muttered as I struggled to break free of her hold. A whistle sounded and she helped me to my feet.

“Showers and then meet Master Lena in the library for your magic lessons.” Pekka ordered.

“So, you have been here a little over a month, you think you made the right choice?” Odith asked as we made our way to the library.

“I don’t know yet.” I was only saying that because of that, that gray-skinned man who lifted me up and carried me to his bed. “When do you think he will be back?”

“Why do you keep asking about Alwin?” I didn’t answer her right away but she got a shocked look on her face and smiled an accusatory

smile, “You like him don’t you?”

“No,” I lied.

“Oh, my you are blushing like a little schoolgirl. Does he make your heart flutter when he looks at you?”

“No.” I lied again. “I just wanted to know where your great master is that is all. I need to tell him how insufferable you have become.” She punched me on my arm which didn’t hurt as bad because of the new muscles that have formed.

Odith and I spent every day together. She felt like a sister. We had so many things in common. We were both half-ling orphans with a human for a mother and elves for a father. The Gnaxtor king killed her parents too. She was a Conjurer that controlled different tarot cards. She is beautiful, but I did not feel for her what I had once felt for Niya and now for Alwin. *Or think I feel.*

Later that evening, while I was reading the book about the *Phoenix Fire*, again, I felt a cold come over me. I grabbed my shawl and adjusted it over my shoulders.

“Serena.” I thought I heard someone call my name, but it was only me in my room. “Serena.”

“Niya?” I must have been going crazy because I thought I heard her voice whispering my name.

“Serena, look at me!” standing right behind me, clear as day, dressed in her white silk gown, her black hair flowing in the wind. I ran and tried to hug her but my arms went right through her.

“How are you here?”

“I don’t have much time,” she looked sad, her face was read from tears. “Why did you leave?”

“I wasn’t given much of a choice when you told me not to go through with the convergence.”

“I didn’t want you to leave.”

“Well, you should have said that then. Not give me a warning that scared me. You could have explained everything to me more.”

“Serena, you are not safe with them,” I crossed my arms while my anger was building, “Ermlon is not safe for you. The Dark Elf...”

“How do you know where I am?”

“Just listen to me. The Dark Elf is trying to use you to take over Xora.”

“Stop calling him that! His name is Alwin.”

“Serena, what have you done?”

“Does it matter? I am finally happy and with people that accept me for who I am. I am stronger and I have become my true self.”

“You were happy with me. I have always accepted you.”

“You kissed me. You kissed me and told me we would never see each other again. Now you come here trying to destroy my heart again. I love you Niya. No, I was in love with you but you broke me. Alwin and Odith have picked up the pieces and I am better now.” She was quiet. I couldn’t bear to see her.

“You are in danger. The Queen knows about your Essence. She will come for you and he won’t be able to save you. She means to use you to take out the Gnaxtor King and everyone else who stands in her way. Leave this place before it’s too late.”

Then, she was gone. Just like that I let the flood I was suppressing overcome me. Tears of sorrow and anger flooded my eyes and face. *Why? Why did she have to come here and say that stuff to me?* Before I knew it, my entire room was engulfed in flames. I was angry, hurt, and releasing my fire felt good.

“Serena!” Odith shouted as the room and I were drowned in water. “What happened?” I fell to the floor, my knees hitting hard, but I didn’t care. Odith held me as I cried. Letting everything I was keeping in me all these years flow out. All the insults, stares, and Niya’s voice. My tears washed it all away.

When I was finally done, my eyes hurt from being so dry, my headache from my hours of crying. Odith stayed with me, holding me, rubbing my back as an older sibling would. “You ready to tell me what happened in here?”

“Niya.” That was all I said. I heard the cold in my voice.

“Who is that?”

“A girl I use to love.” I sat up and I saw the sympathy in her eyes. “She came to me saying blasphemies things. Alwin was the Dark Elf, and the Queen knows about Ermlon and me. She said that I am being used. A pawn in their game.”

“No wonder you got angry. Alwin does not use us. As for your Queen, I have seen what she can do.”

“I once saw her turn a boy to ash. Niya helped her do it too.”

“I thought Confessors were honorable.”

“I never told you she was a Confessor.” She backed away from me, covering her mouth like she said something she was not supposed to. “How do you know about her power?”

“Serena, I watched you for months before I made contact with you.”

“Why?”

“I needed to be sure you could be trusted. Bring you to my home and around my family.”

“Why does everyone keep lying to me?” I felt my fire coming on again, but I simmered down. “Leave me alone. I need time to think.”

“Let us take you to a different room. One that hasn’t been turned to ash.”

I let Odith escort me to a different room. I didn’t sleep that night. Just sat by my fire thinking about everything. I gripped my amulet and prayed to my Mother again. I don’t think she can actually hear me. *Is she even dead?*

I must have dozed off because I was awakened with a knock on my door. I looked into the small mirror above the vanity, my eyes were glazed over with fatigue, my neck was cricked from me sleeping in a chair all night. The dark shadows below my sockets were the memory from the embers of last night.

“Serena, Alwin is back and would like to speak with you.” Odith was dressed in a purple gown that made her eyes pop.

“Why are you in a dress?” hearing the exhaustion in my own voice was even more tiring.

“Because I am going on a date.” No wonder she was chipper. She said she hasn’t been physical with anyone in over a month. “Now get dressed, you are meeting with him in the War Room.”

Great. I thought to myself. I will be sure to jump for joy at the sight of my own demise.



“SERENA,” my heart started to flutter when I heard him say my name. Just like It did when he said it while my lips were on his neck.

“Alwin.” I spoke. Trying to hide the nervousness in my voice.

“I was told you have progressed amicably while I was away.” We both started circling the map. Keeping our distance but I could feel the tension rising between us. “And last night. You burned down your room. Why is that?”

“I was angry.” He smirked at me. I could not tell whether it was smug or not.

“Do you prefer my bedchambers?” I stopped. And then there he was. I felt his breath against my neck again. I couldn’t stop my heart from pounding. “I have missed you while I was away. I remembered your lips,”

he kissed my neck, “the feel of your hands on my body.” He grabbed my waist.

“Stop it!” I stepped away from him. Turned and his face was full of disappointment. “I am not some plaything. You cannot toy with me.”

“Is that what you think I am doing here? Toying with you?” I saw hurt in his eyes.

“Well, you are older. I am sure you have had many women share your sheets with you.” He let out a sigh.

“Serena, I have never even kissed anyone until you.” My ears couldn’t believe it. “If you don’t trust me. Then ask whomever you want. I will ask a Confessor to use her power just to prove it to you.”

“I barely know you Alwin. Are you the Dark Elf?” he stepped closer, I stepped back.

“Alright. No. My Father was given that title because of the terrible things he did.”

“How old are you?”

“225 years old.”

“Why don’t you age?”

“Because once pixies reach the age of twenty-five, they stop aging.”

“So your Mother was a pixie?”

“Now who is playing games?”

“I am just trying to know you.”

“Yes. My Father bewitched her into his bed. She was killed when I was a child.” His voice trembled while speaking. “My Father tried to raise me to be a bad man. But, I ran away. I didn’t want to be like him.”

“Alwin,” he stepped towards me. I didn’t move this time.

“With your permission, I would like to kiss you.” I nodded and he kissed me. It was a soft kiss. “Serena, I would never hurt you. What your friend said...”

“Ex-friend.”

“It isn’t true. Well the part about me.” I believed him. There was still a seed of doubt in me. He held me tight as if I was going to run away. I felt safe in his arms and it scared me.

“Alwin!” Odith came bursting in the doors. Fear on her face.

“What is it?” he asked letting me go.

“We are under attack!”

ALWIN



ODITH DISAPPEARED INTO THE CHAOTIC CROWD BEFORE I COULD ASK HER any questions. Gripping Serena's arm, I pulled her with me.

"You need to get to safety." I yelled but she didn't seem to hear me as she tore from my grip racing into the fight before us. Trying to charge after her, I am pushed into a wall by a Gnaxtor soldier with foul breath. My shadows release wrapping themselves tightly around the creature and pulling him off me.

It lands on the ground breathless as it dissipates. An illusion? No one here is that powerful or skilled except.... Odith. Running down the halls I ignore the soldiers and although they can still kill and wound, I am unafraid. The roaring beat in my chest quickens when I can't seem to find Serena.

"Alwin," I hear Pekka in the distant. Turning I see him toss a longbow and quiver full of arrows at me knowing that archery was a skill I mastered a long time ago.

"It's an illusion Pekka, none of this is real." I yelled back just as another soldier brought an axe down towards me. Rolling out of the way, the axe trim the end of my bun slightly. Knocking my arrow, I shoot it through the image, and it dissolves.

“It may very well be fake, but the cuts and bruises are very real.” He spats wiping blood from a cut on his brow. Sauntering over to him, we are encircled by an army of them.

“Where is Odith?” I ask.

“Last I saw she was running out of the War Room.”

“She did this. I don’t know why I just know.” Pekka let out an angered yell before we engage with the army of beasts. Each one of my arrows piercing through the images but leaving no real damage. Unsheathing my sword from my side, I stop wasting my ammunition and start swinging.

Metal clashing with metal as sparks flickered into the cold air. Just before a sword thrust through Pekka’s back, they all vanish.

“What the hell happened?” he asked.

“Its over.” I stated both of us panting with sweat dripping down our brows. Looking around I can see the damage that is left behind. Some bodies lay unconscious or dead in their own pools of blood.

“Where is Serena?” I asked looking for her anywhere and everywhere. Pekka and I begin running helplessly around searching for her. Panic rises and I regret not telling her we are mates. That what she is feeling is real and that it is meant for us to be together.

The distant sound of Odith’s voice catches my ears and I run down a narrow hall, turning to see her. Serena is chained to a chair while a creature sounding just like Odith approaches her.

“You are mine.” Odith sates as I knock an arrow it releases but misses.

“She isn’t going anywhere with you.” *Braxor!*

SERENA



SCREAMS OF PANIC AND CHAOS ECHOED THROUGHOUT THE NARROW HALLS. Children are ushered through various portals, I felt a tight grip on my wrist, looking up, I saw fear in Alwin's eyes. It was not fear for himself, no, it was fear for his people, for this sanctuary he built for people like us. Burning down with the flames of dragon fire. Then I saw what was attacking us. The same people who took my mother from me. With their large yellow tusk sticking out from the steel helmets.

"Gnaxtor." I murmured. Memory of their stench and the thick blood on my skin flashed into my head. Clutching my amulet tighter, I ripped my other hand free from Alwin's hold. Running down the narrow hall, I see Rose pinned to a wall by a soldier. Willing my essence, I summoned a fire ball in my hand jolting it at the beast. Smiling as his body turned to ash.

"Thank you." Rose said.

"You need to get out of here." The sound of stomping boots, clashing metal, and screaming, snapped my attention behind us. Alwin was encircled by four soldiers. "I need to help him, find a Iluminate to portal you out of here." Without another word, the pixie vanished. I felt my fire rising inside of me, burning for me to let go, as I took down two of the four, my eyes landed on Alwin. A mist of shadows circled him. Two

strands reached out to the remaining soldiers, gripping their necks, with a flick of his wrist, the sound of cracking bones filled the halls.

“What are you?” I asked, as my flames start to burn out, those once blue eyes were nothing but pits of darkness.

“You know exactly what I am.” He answered, the darkness fading. Before I could ask any more questions, a company of soldiers stormed the halls. We were outnumbered, outmanned, and outmatched. “Where is Odith?”

Alwin asked as his shadows started to rise again and my flames started to form in my palms. “The last time I saw her was in the War Room.”

Both of us on high alert, expecting an attack from any of the soldiers, but none of them moved. Standing like poised statues, I waited for Alwin to make a move, yet he did not. All of this felt strange and unwarranted. “Where is your leader?”

I asked, since Alwin decided to remain mute. None of them answered as I pressed my back into Alwin. The sound of clapping echoes from nearby, lowering my hands, I see her and my heart breaks.

“Odith? What did you do?” I asked, not realizing that my flames disappeared completely, and the firm back of Alwin disappeared.

“I am taking what is mine.” Her tone was harsh as she snapped her fingers and the army of soldiers disappeared. It was an illusion. Then I saw it, the transparent figure of a horned beast with wings, the upper body of a man, and the lower body resembling that of a hawk. Its talons clutching a chain that connected two naked figures by their necks, walking behind him. *The Devil card*.

“You manipulated the *Devil Card* to create this delusion? Do you realize what you have done? The cards will punish you for this.” I stated, all too calmly. She let out a laugh, approaching me, her once friendly face, now the depiction of pure evil. My arms tighten to my body, my head

snapping down, chains of iron were wrapping themselves tightly around me. Thrusting me back into a wooden chair. “Why are you doing this?”

She approached me, her imaged dissipating as another woman appeared before me. Midnight straight hair cut to just below her pointed ears, pale skin, rose colored lips, and black eyes looked down at me. The dress Odith was wearing changed its form into nothing. The naked body of a creature I had never seen before stood in front of me. A tail, with an arrow tipped end, swayed behind her.

“What are you? Who are you?”

“I never lied about my name.” turning her back to me, I saw her body was covered in grey scales, matching that of a dragon. “Like what you see dear? I know you enjoy the company of men and women.” She turned her head to me and winked.

“What are you playing at Odith? Where is everyone? Why all the deceit?” I asked, struggling with my bindings. With each move I made, they seemed to tighten.

“I wouldn’t move, they are magical, set to tighten as you try to resist them.” Another card appeared in her hand, The Moon card, she is going to portal us somewhere. Alwin, where are you?

“Let me go Odith.” I yelled as she summoned a portal of pink and violet light.

“I can’t do that my friend. We are going home.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you.” Both of our heads snapped to the man standing at the end of the hall. A longbow and arrow in hand. Without another word, he released it, but Odith was too quick. She blocked it with her powers, sending the arrow straight through the swirling vortex.

“She’s mine Alwin.” Odith hissed and charged forward. They engaged in a fight, while I remain struggling, trying to summon my fire. The chains are pure iron, the one weakness all Essence have. Iron suppresses our abilities.

“She will never be yours Odith.” I heard the Elve laugh as they continued fighting one another.

“You think she is yours Alwin? She belongs with her Mother and Father.” Those words paralyzed me, and the fighting stopped. Both panting with cuts and bruises.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. Odith gave us a wicked smile. “Tell me.”

“Why do you think I found you? Mommy and Daddy want their little girl back home with them.”

“She’s lying to you Serena.” I did not want to believe her, even after everything.

“Who are you going to believe? The woman who saved you from Convergence. Or the man named after the Dark Elf himself? Did he tell you about being fated mates?”

Before I could answer, the side of the wall splintered with fire. My ears were ringing from my head hitting the hard floor, blood trickling down my face. A large talon wrapped tightly around my still bound body, lifting me into the air. Above me, I saw the underbelly of an auburn dragon. It is large, about fifty feet in height, and its wingspan just as large. My eyes fluttered close as my body fell unconscious.

When I awoke, I felt a thick bed underneath me, the chains were gone, but my head felt as if an anvil pounded into it multiple times. Sitting up, I was in Alwin’s chambers again. *Was it all a dream?* The doors opened, and the light from the hall flooded in. Rose walked in holding a tray of food and water.

“What happened?” my voice was hoarse.

“You better let Alwin tell you.” She answered handing me the plate of bread and cheese.

“How long was I out this time?” she ignored me. “Okay, where is he so I can get my questions answered.”

“I’m right here.” That beautiful smile of his crept right inside of my body again. Rose excused herself and shut the door. He stalked toward me, sitting at the edge of the bed. Reaching up, he examined what I can only assume to be the source of my pain.

“What happened?” I asked before sipping the water.

“What do you remember?” he asked as he dabbed a cloth to the cut on my forehead. It smelled of herbs and eased my pain.

“Nothing really. Just glimpse of an attack. Some grey scaled woman, and the Gnaxtor soldiers.” I took a bite of my bread.

“Are you sure?” he asked, placing the cloth on the tray. Then it hit me.

“Odith. She betrayed us. And I saw a dragon. But how? Why?” I wanted to ask about the last part. The part about us being fated mates.

“I don’t know. She disappeared the moment Braxor broke through the wall.”

“Braxor? The dragon?” He smiled at me.

“Yes. Braxor is a dragon and a friend.”

“I didn’t think there were dragons anywhere except the colonies.” I placed my plate of food down, reached for his hand, and he smiled again.

“I called to him. Braxor and I have an understanding. Something put in place about a century ago. We are allies. When one calls for aid from another, we answer it.” We were silent for a few heartbeats, holding each other’s hands. At some point, he moved behind me, my rear tucking between his thighs, as he draped his arms over my shoulders, and I leaned into him. *At least this was not an illusion.*

“What are you thinking about?” He asked in my ear. His lips brushing against it, sending heat through my body down to my sex. I did not answer, just craned my neck to give him better access. When his lips kissed my skin, I felt myself dampen as my arousal took hold.

“What are we going to do about Odith?” He paused at my collar bone.

“We could track her. But that is the furthest thing from my mind now.” There was no need for me to ask. I felt how aroused he was behind me. I am not ready for that step. If we cross that line, what will that mean? Plus, a part of me still loves Niya. I cannot share my bed with him when I have not fully let her go yet.

“I’m not ready.” I turned my head, our lips touching softly. “What did she mean by us being fated mates?”

“It means that we are fated to be with one another.” He stated so calmly while my heart was pounding in my ears. “But only if you choose to pursue that life with me.”

“I...” I didn’t know what to say. I knew my feelings for him were strong, but they are strong for Niya too. I am so confused. “I need more time.”

“Okay.” He said onto my lips. Pressing our kiss deeper, he broke away. Immediately changing the subject which I didn’t mind. “Odith has connections with the Gnaxtor King and if what she said about your parents is true, I can only assume they are there too.”

“Where exactly? And we cannot trust that she was telling the truth. I never met my Father and the last time I saw my Mother was when she was being taken by them.” My hand instinctively went for my amulet. “Where is it?” panic started rising in me as I shot up.

“Where is my amulet?” scrambling to my feet, Alwin appearing confused. I chucked the sheets from the mattress, the pillows followed.

“What amulet?”

“The one my Mother gave to me. It is shaped like a star. I never take it off. How could you not notice it as many times as your lips have been near it.” he scoffed but helped me search.

“Serena.” He approached me, trying to get my attention as tears started rolling down my face. “Serena, look at me.”

Bracing both of my shoulders, he looked at me. Brushing the tears on my cheek with his thumbs. “It was the only thing my mother ever gave to me. The last item left of her love for me.”

“We will find it.” He pulled me into his embrace. “I won’t let her get away with any of this Serena. I promise.”

The next morning, everything was back to normal. Those that evacuated came back, the palace was rebuilt with magic, and my body was healed. Alwin and the class leaders held a meeting to produce a plan. Find Odith and prepare for war. He even issued a search for my missing necklace.

“I say we bring da war to em.” Pekka stated lifting his axe.

“Strike back and with a vengeance.” Lena, the magic leader said.

“No.” I heard myself say and the room went silent as all eyes locked onto me.

“The Gnaxtor King wants me. For whatever reason, there will be no more bloodshed because of me. My life isn’t worth it.” Alwin glared at me, but I ignored him.

Getting to my feet, I walked to the map, placing my palms on the table. “All my life, I have been insulted and judge for being born the way I am. The Gnaxtor King ordered his soldiers to march into my village, take my Mother, and I assume killed my Father before I ever had the chance to meet him. I don’t know why he wants me, but it has something to do with my parents.”

“I will summon Odith and go with her. That way, all of you can remain safe. Fortify your walls and prepare for war in case it comes to you. Once I get close enough to the King, I will strike. You all have taught me well and I thank you for it, but now, I must protect you.” The room was silent. Pekka spoke first, agreeing, then the other leaders followed. My gaze landed on Alwin, he was seething mad, but I saw pride in his eyes. “Then we are all in agreement. I must kill the King.”

“Leave us.” Alwin ordered and without protest, they complied.

“You can’t stop me.” I crossed my arms.

“How dare you?” his voice was low and cold. “You think your life is worthless, you don’t mean anything to anyone?”

“I never have and never will.” My voice raised. This was going to be a screaming match.

“You are a damned fool.” He turned on me. Charging at me, backing me into the wall. “You are a damned fool. Because if you think for one second that I don’t.” he paused.

“Don’t what?” my words came out breathless.

“Nothing. You want to get yourself killed, fine, but just know this, Serena.” He leaned into me.

“Say it.” I gasped. He did not use words as his lips crashed into mine. His hands landed on my hips hoisting me up as I straddled him. It was claiming, owning, and I could feel how much he cared for me. How much my words hurt him. He sat me on the tabletop, both of us panting. “Say it.”

“You’re mine.” His blue eyes shone bright with desire. The desire to have me, to claim me, to love me. “And I’m yours Serena. Whenever you want to claim me and tomorrow, when you leave to kill that murderous bastard, I want you to know that I cared. I want you to come home to me. But also, if you do not come home, this world is going to burn.”

ALWIN



I ALMOST LOST HER.

Now I have to let her go. I told her about us being fated mates and she didn't reject the idea. Tomorrow she leaves and I should ask her to stay with me tonight. Getting to my feet, I walk out my room and head straight to hers stopping just outside with my fist raised.

"Serena I know you are freaked about us being together, but I think that before you go on your suicide mission we should be together." I mumbled under my breath before knocking.

"She isn't in there." Rose said from behind.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"She left moments ago with Odith."

"What?" Pure rage coursed through me, and I ran to the reflection pool willing it to show her to me. I can't find her. Falling to my knees, gentle hands grip my shoulders.

"You have to trust her." Rose stated as she messaged my tense muscles. "I have watched her over the past month, and I know you have too. She knows how to control her magic She will not fail."

"Rose I shouldn't have let her go alone." I sound defeated.

"You love her?" she ask.

“After my Mother died, I didn’t know I could love again. Not until I see my eyes on her. Everything snapped into place. I have felt powerless being around her. It’s all new.”

“Did you tell her?” I shook my head. “When she comes home show her how much you care about her. Women like action not just words. If you want to be with her and want her to know you love her, then you need to show her.”

“I have tried Rose. She isn’t ready for it. I am never thought I would be. She said she needed time and now I’m afraid we won’t have any. Even if she defeats the King and Odith we still have Queen Lilac to worry about. Gods Rose, how fucked up am I to care more about Serena than the entire realm?”

“You are not fucked up Alwin. You are in love.” The sound of rushing boots came in getting to my feet I see Pekka and Lena charging towards me.

“Get off your knees boy. Serena is doing her part we must do ours.” He is right. Sitting around feeling angry at myself isn’t going to help.

“Serena has twenty-four hours before we go looking for her. In that time, I want you all to prepare the troops. If she doesn’t come home I am burning this world to the ground.”

The room erupts in cheers not at my speech but because they have come to know and care for her as well. Throughout her time here Serena show respect and maturity with her teachers. Through the reflection pool I would see Pekka and Lena boasting about her abilities. The humility she has in unmatched.

After they all leave I decide to stay. Using all of my magic to search for. I fell asleep at some point because a glowing red light flashed before my eyes within the pool. Stunned at the sight appearing before me, I watch as Serena is engulfed in flames with a dagger in her heart.

My mate is gone. I feel the pain in my soul like a thousand knives stabbing me all at once.. She can't be there is no way Serena is dead. Looking again the water is back to normal and I am left with a hole in my heart. Walking down the halls, I manage to make my way to the open courtyard.

My world caving in as tears flood my eyes. Rain begins to pour down and I let it soak me. Wash away the pain, the memories, the flash of the dagger protruding from her beautiful breast. I as a fool to let her go.

"Braxor." I yell loud and into the roaring skies. "Braxor come here."

"Alwin." He was here just like always.

"Get ready to burn this entire world down." I didn't sound like myself. A shudder ran through me at the memory of my Father's voice running through my ears.

"What happened?" he demanded. Glaring at him I answer.

"Serena is dead, and the world will pay for its crimes against her." The dragon snarls at me.

"Get ahold of yourself boy. The Phoenix is not dead."

"I watched as Odith's bladed pierced her heart." A large talon came toward me, I didn't move. Braxor wouldn't hurt me.

"Then why is your heart glowing red?" Looking down I see it for myself. Dancing in golden embers under my skin is my heart. "You haven consummated your bond Alwin but when your Mate truly dies, whether they reject you or not, you will know because it will feel as if your very own heart is ripped from your chest." My anger started to recede the longer I stared at my chest.

"I don't know what to do anymore. Ever since she came here I feel lost. Every decision I make seems like the wrong one. I shouldn't have run to the colonies. That is time I should've spent with her Now she is gone, and I don't know if I will see her again."

"Having flaws isn't a terrible thing my friend."

“It is if you have a Father like mine.”

“You are nothing like your Father.” He growled with the rain still pouring down on us. “Your Father was a coward you are not. Crossing paths with a dragon takes bravery something your Father never dared to do.”

“Braxor, I was going to use you to rein your fire.” He let out a ruffed laugh.

“No magic, not even that of the Tarot Cards could be used against us dragons.” I remembered his warnings about Odith. That is why her magic didn’t affect him.

“I ‘m sorry I didn’t listen to you about Odith. If I had then Serena might would be here.” I paused wiping the rain from my face as it slowed to a sprinkle. “Her magic didn’t work on you, so you weren’t deceived.”

“Odith is powerful, but the deck will turn on her. Trust in the Ancients to seek their payment.” He stretched out his wings acting as if he were about to leave. “If there isn’t anything else, I need to return so my army is prepared for war.”

“Thank you Braxor.” With a flap of his wings, he was gone, and I made my way back to the reflection pool praying I would see her again.

SERENA



“ODITH, I SUMMON THEE.” LAST NIGHT, ALWIN AND I SLEPT TOGETHER. We did not have sex, we just held each other until I fell asleep. We talked all evening, about my plan, my life in hiding. Alwin told me about his childhood, how his brother was killed for being a halfling. We both have our scars and that is what brings us closer together. Should I have crossed that line? No, will I regret it? I hope not. He asked me to wait another day and I said I would, but I lied.

“Serena, you miss me already?” whirling around, I find her appearing in her true form.

“Take me to him.” She was suspicious. I knew she would not take the bait so easily, but I planned for that. Lowering to my knees, bowing my head, I raised my arms, clasping my hands together, showing my submission.

“A sudden change of heart? Do not take me to be a fool Serena, Alwin and you cannot defeat me. I’m stronger than you both.”

“Take me to him.” I repeated. Iron chains tighten around my wrist. A force pulled me to my feet, my eyes locked onto hers. “You were much cuter in your other form.”

“I thought you liked your women naked?” she pursed her lips, winking at me flirtatiously. Pulling me closer to her, “You know Serena, I have

mastered the entire deck of cards. Each one listens to my every word. It's something I could teach you to do." Her lips caressed my cheek.

"The Ancient Marceilles created them for a purpose, and it was not for manipulation. When the time comes, your dues will be paid. The cards don't take lightly to manipulation." I knew that much about them.

"Moon Card, I summon thee." Just as before, the transparent figure appeared, and a portal opened. "Move." I was pushed through the portal of luminescent lights. Hitting the hard ground on the other side a moment later. The Moon was high in the sky, the air was dry and hot. There is no forest, no greens of any kind, nothing but sand for miles.

"Where are we?" I asked as Odith closed the portal.

"Welcome to Amarathian."

"I don't see anything but wasteland." A smirk formed across her lips. She knew something I did not. Odith began to recite a new tarot incantation and a gust of wind blew as another transparent figure appeared. A man with shoulder length brown hair, dressed in a white robe, with a red cape around him, and an infinity symbol appeared waving a white rod. In a shimmer of light, a large Castle appeared before us. *The Magician Card. She truly uses every card she can to her advantage. Ancient one, if you can hear my prayers, strike her down before she continues to manipulate your power.*

Ten thick, round emerald towers overshadow the skyline of this massive castle and are connected by strengthened; wide walls made of quartz. This King genuinely loves green. As we approached it, I could see the narrow windows are scattered generously across the walls in an asymmetric pattern, along with huge crenelations for archers.

"Did you use the cards to create this too?" I asked sarcastically, earning me a scornful look. We stepped through a regular gate with great wooden doors and a moat that guards the inhabitants of this island castle. As we enter a corridor, a grand staircase shoots off to the left and right,

meeting at a balcony in the middle. The walls are barren, and there are no other halls or doors.

Ushering me to the stairs, we take them two at a time, I avoid Odith's annoying tail, almost tempted to stomp on it if it did not mean I would fall to my death. At the top, we hasten a walk through two vast metal doors and into a large throne room. Sitting center front, on a stone of forged swords is a large man. To my surprise, it is a human man about six feet tall, broad shouldered, and auburn hair. His age shows through the silver that peeks out from the sides of his golden crown. Dressed in all black, with a single sword strapped to his right side, his blue eyes land on me.

"Is this another illusion?" I whisper to Odith. With a smile and a wink, she ushered us further forward and then took a knee.

"My King, I present to you, Serena of Narborim, the phoenix fire." Our eyes locked, but then his gaze trailed my body from head to toe.

"Come here girl." He gestured with a gloved finger. I did not move, but it did not matter as the magic Odith was using pushed me. Another card I assume, just cannot figure out which one. "So, you are Hellena's daughter."

My Mother's name. Getting off his throne, he approached me, cupping my head, turning it side to side. "What part of you is Elve? You look like a human."

"My hair is the color of chocolate and my eyes the color of the sea. No pureblood human has these features."

"Neither do pureblood elves. Hmm. Yet somehow you have the most powerful Essence ever known to this world. How is that possible?" He went back to sit on his throne.

"Are my Mother and Father here?" I asked, my eyes darting across the room. There was nothing else here. No other doors, no windows, just a throne, the door we came through, and us. How is this possible?

“They are dead. Killed a long time ago.” He said it so matter-of-factly my blood was boiling. I need these iron chains to come off me or else I can only kill him by sword or dagger. I will never get past Odith, not without my powers.

“What do you want with me then?” Odith was rising back to her feet at my question. Smirking at me.

“I’m going to drain your blood and drink it. That Phoenix Fire belongs to me and no one else. You are not worthy of it.” just like the Ancients did.

“You will burn if you do this.” They both laughed at me and then with disgust, Odith proceed to kiss the King. It appears they are more than associates.

“On your knees Odith, just like I like it.” I heard him say. She undid his breeches, taking his rock-hard cock out, making the situation a thousand times more disgusting, and then went ahead to suck it deep in her throat. I tried turning away but I could not, the magic hold on me held me in place. “You will watch and learn from her. This is how you can earn your life girl.”

“I am no one’s sex slave.” His head fell back as he started to thrust his hips hard and held Odith’s head down onto him. The noises she was making sounded painful, not pleasurable. With a loud grunt, his hips slowed and then Odith gently removed her mouth from him. Turning to look at me with a smug smile, then licking her lips clean. I did not hold my vomit in, heaving all the contents of my stomach onto the stone floors.

A bust of laughter came from both. A mix of a deep chuckle and high-pitched cackle making my ears hurt. “Take the girl to my chambers, strip her bare, and then chain her to the wall.”

“You won’t touch me.” I heard a growl leave from deep within my throat. Surprising me and earning a sneer of disapproval. The King charged at me, nearly slipping in my vomit, a thick hand wrapped tightly around my throat, lifting me into the air.

“You are mine, there is no use fighting it. If I want to fuck you, I will. If I want my pets, my guards, even Odith to fuck you, they will. You are a powerless abomination with no one left in this world to save you.” I did not let my fear show at the truth in his words.

“Fuck you.” I spit in his face. Before I could catch my next breath, my body was hurled into the wall. My right shoulder cracking on impact, sending a burning pain through me. Before I could get to my feet, my back is pinned to the wall, both of my arms spread out injuring my already broken shoulder further.

“You will submit. I will have your blood,” he approached me, my eyes dart to Odith and I saw that this was all her doing. All the Essence, conjuring, manipulation, it was because of her. And like a damned fool the King is, he cannot see the dagger that is about to be pierced through his back. *The Fool Card. Blonde haired, fare skin man, with a shortened dress of sunflowers, and yellow knee-high boots hovers above him.*

“She is making a fool out of you.” I spat. My own blood was coating my mouth, the feeling of my limbs stretching, taring is so painful, I am not sure how much longer I can take this.

“You should’ve never come here Serena,” gripping my throat again, his wide eyes, foul breath, and hard body pressing into me. “She played you for a fool the entire time you were with each other. Odith is an immensely powerful Essence. She has mastered the deck and those cards bend to her will just like you will.” A memory of my time in study hall with the All-Father flashed in my brain. It was shortly after my arrival; he was showing me the book the scribes created discussing Essence and Tarot Magic.

“If you master a full deck of cards, it can be a blessing and a curse.” The old man said.

“Why?” I asked looking at the incredibly detailed designs of each card.

“Because if another touches your cards, their allegiance will be compromised, and no one can escape that fate.” The sound of my other

shoulder cracking brought me out of my own head. I did not cry; my body has become numb to this torture. Unsure how, it is because I am already dying.

“Show me your deck Odith.” I demanded. Ignoring the King was the wrong thing to do and the hard knuckles connecting with my face told me so. More blood filled my mouth as my left eye started to swell. “Jealousy is so unbecoming of a king.”

“I was going to make it more pleasurable instead of painful, but you love the pain. You are relishing in it and that has me pissed and aroused at the same time.” I felt the wetness of his tongue on my face, making me spit all that blood from my mouth.

“Why don’t you have your pet release me from the invisible bindings and I can show just how much pain I can inflict. I assure you; it will be more painful than pleasurable.” I saw him ponder it before I felt my body thud to the floor. The chains were gone. *Idiot*. Looking up to them both, I could not help but smile. Getting to my feet, my arms are useless as they hang nimbly by my sides.

“You can’t do anything with disconnected arms Serena. Your threats are cute, I may even have some respect for you,” Odith walked toward me, that ghastly tail swaying in tune with the direction of her hips. “Is this your final request before you die?” she was going to show me her cards. Any part of me that touches them could work.

“Yes.” I stated holding my chin up high. Odith snapped her fingers, conjuring a small round wooden table, with a stack of tan cards with golden embellishments at the center. “Read me.” I heard myself say.

“You want me to do a Tarot Reading?”

“Yes. You both are so determined to kill me. I want to know what your cards think is going to happen.” I saw her chest start to rise and fall faster. She is ruffled because I have cornered her. “Are you afraid the cards will betray you?”

“Sit.” She snarled and I found myself sitting in a wooden chair, her across from, shuffling her deck. My eyes drifted to the king who was standing over her shoulder, watching. “I will pull three cards and you will see that death will be your fate.”

She stopped shuffling, picked the first card from the top, and placed it face down on the tabletop. Repeating the same with the next two. The anticipation was killing me at what the cards, her cards, were deciding my fate to be. “Are you ready to know your fate?”

“What happens if the cards do not predict my death?” I asked.

“It does not work like that. The cards are powerful, but they do not decide your death. Just a possible course along your journey.” She huffed out. “It does not matter anyways. You will be dead soon after this and the rest of Xora will fall to its knees before the King.”

“You truly believe and want a pureblooded human to rule all of Xora?” dodging my question, she flipped the first card over. *The Chariot: a masterful card of execution, confidence, and wisdom. A regal gladiator charging into battle. That is a good sign.*

“The Chariot is your first card, which has many meanings, but the one I favor the most for you is the opposite. There will be no victory for you, no swiftness, nor achievement. You are going to lose.”

“Do I sense fear in your voice Odith?” she did not answer as I saw a slight tremor in her hand when she reached for the second card. *A man is strung up by his left ankle, dangling between two cut staves.*

“This is more like it. The Hanged Man, or woman to be more specific. You are a sacrifice which is what this tarot means if you weren’t aware.” She smirked and I wanted to punch her in that scaley face.

“Flip the last one.” Reaching for it, she hesitates. “Don’t stop now Odith, you are nearly there. Victory at your very fingertips.”

“Death.” We said at the same time as my eyes landed on the image of a skeleton wielding his mighty scythe. *Transformation, rebirth, end of one*

cycle and the beginning of another.

“Tell me Odith, are the cards in my favor?” she looked up at me. Afraid, she was afraid that her cards betrayed her. I did not have to touch them to turn them against her. She did that herself.

“No matter.” Before she could snap her fingers, I slammed my head onto the table, sending the cards and splintered wood across the floor. “What have you done?”

My head pounding, blowing my hair from my face, the warmth of a cut on my face dripping down to my mouth, I smiled. “Your cards are no longer in allegiance with you.”

Those invisible chains start to wrap around my joints again, but not this time. I will not be a prisoner to be raped and killed.

“You’re a worthless little abomination. Do you realize what you have done?” she yelled backing into the arms of her king. His eyes are glazed over, as if he is in a trance.

“Yes, insult me, call me whatever names you wish if it helps you feel better. My last card was Death which terrifies the hell out of you because it means transformation. My second card,” I continued getting to my feet, feeling my bones morphing back into place. “The hanged man, which means sacrifice, but I have been sacrificing my entire life. And you know what my last one will be?”

“What’s that little girl? Reuniting with mommy and daddy? Poor orphan Serena, I will gladly reunite you.” Double swords appeared in her hands, she charged at me with a shout. My arms are still healing themselves, so all I could do was remember the defensive moves Pekka taught me.

“My first card,” I started with a grunt as I dodge her cuts towards my neck from both sides. Reaching out my leg, I went to sweep her feet, but she jumped, dodging my moves.

“Pekka taught me too.” She sneered and I kicked her in the back.

“Good, then this is an even fight.” The feeling in my left hand started to return, picking up a piece of the wood to shield her blows, I continued my distraction. Stalling until I could fully embrace my fire. “My first card was The Chariot, which means I am going to achieve the mission I came here to do.”

Stopping mid-fight, I let her blade pierce through my heart. The king was screaming, Odith’s bewilderment, my world slowing. “In death, I am reborn.”



THROUGH THE WIDENED eyes of Odith, I see my glowing reflection looking back at me. As I watch my own transformation, looking through the eyes of my enemies, my body morphs. Beautiful iridescent wings of fire shoot from my back. My brown hair is adorned with streaks of crimson, as fire morphs my bloodied, torn clothes, into a shimmering auburn gown. The ice of my eye’s melts into two golden suns. Transparent figures cavort all around me. Figures matching that of every card in the deck.

“What have you done?” the king shouted. My eyes dart to him, as he reaches for the hilt of his sword. “Now I will never be able to drink her blood.” Before he could pierce her through the back, I shot fire at him, but his blade blocked it. “Pure iron, not even phoenix fire can penetrate iron.”

“You tried to kill me.” Odith was hurt. I felt pity for her.

“You will pay for your sins against the cards and against the people of Xora.” Two blades of fire shot out from my hands as I charged at them both. They both have iron blades, blocking my magic.

Odith launched herself at me, going straight for my heart again. But I whirled away. As Odith struck air, the King’s blade came crashing down toward me. Blocking it, I felt something pulling at my wings, it tasted of metal. One blade blocking the King, the other blocking Odith, I was

pinned between them. Odith's magic fighting for control, the Kings impossible strength pushing me to falter.

"Give up Serena, you cannot win." The King yelled. But as I felt them moving closer, my own magic lessening, the figure of a goddess and her lion appeared before me. She wore a crown of infinity upon her head. *The Strength Card: Mind & Body*. Through the silence, I felt her with me, willing strength into my very soul. With great force, I pushed with all my Essence, knocking them against opposing walls.

Looking over, I see the King is unconscious, blood trickling from his mouth and nose. Odith, is breathing heavily, confirming that the wind was knocked from her.

"Finish it, Serena." She heaved. I approached her with my blades, pointing one at her throat as she lifted her chin to me. Unafraid that I now held her life in my hands.

"No." I sheathed my fire, my wings tucking behind me, and then she laughed.

"All that power and you can't even finish the job. You worthless half thing." Her words no longer had any effect on me, but I found myself turning toward her again.

"I am not a half thing anymore." She laughed at me, struggling to her feet, blades in hand.

"You're right." She charged toward me, our blades clashing, forming an X. "You are nothing but a whore's off-spring. Worthless, piece of horse dung, underserving of what was gifted to you."

"Your words are useless Odith. I will not kill you, but I pity you, because now, you will live the rest of your days here with your King. Doing what you do best."

"Plotting your death." She inquired, pushing at me.

"Getting on your knees." With all my strength I had left, which was not much, I knocked her into the wall with a hard bone cracking thud. Both

enemies lay unconscious by my hands. The castle started to shake as the ceiling began to crumble above me. *I could conjure the Moon to portal me out of here, but I do not know how.*

Trust in the cards Serena. They are with you. The familiar voice of my Mother sang in my head. Without further hesitation, I formed a bubble of amber around me, feeling every hit of each rock trying to break my shield. Pulling out the Moon card, I pressed my lips to it, asking for permission. A portal of golden light opened, I could not see through the other side, but I jumped through just as a large rock crashed through my shields.

I landed in a thick pile of snow, the sound of sizzling, and the waft of steam circled me as the heat of my flames simmered out with the touch of the frost. Getting to my feet, I notice I am in a foreign frozen tundra. Encircled in mountains with caps of snow, I stand center a frozen lakebed. Unsure if I am even in Xora anymore, I feel for the cards, but they are nowhere to be found. I have lost them.

The sound of a screeching bird came from the skies above me. Shifting my gaze, I see the body of a magnificent griffin leading a flock to the tops of the mountains. Griffins, which could mean that a Confessor is nearby. Ancients watch over me. Spreading my wings, dusting the snow from them, I will myself to the skies. Following closely in their shadow, but not too close to spook them into attacking me. Flying was a different feeling. The wind was a friend, aiding me with each movement.

I was expecting to be cold flying here, but my internal core was acting like its own fire, warming me from the inside out. We flanked left, then right, and repeated the movement several times. I am starting to feel dizzy, until I notice the small figure, dressed in all white, saddled on the back of the lead Griffin. Her hard eyes locked on me. The flock darted down, landing on the top of a small flattop of rock and snow.

Planting my feet firmly, the Confessor approached me, no weapon in hand. Common for them. Their Essence is the only weapon they need to

bend someone to their will.

“Who are you?” The voice was familiar, the hood prevented me from seeing her face.

“Who are you?” I shot the question back at her. Her pure white gloved hands dropped her hood, and to my surprise, I saw my old friend again. “Niya?”

Her expression cemented that my new appearance erased my old one entirely. “It’s me, Serena, I know I look different and there is a perfectly good explanation for it, but-” she ran to me, throwing her arms around my head and crashing those soft lips onto mine. Wrapping my arms tightly around her small waist, my tongue piercing the slit of her lips. She gave in to me, tearing at my clothes. This was going to happen, it needed to happen.

With our clothes gone, her mouth explored my new body. Pressing, sucking, nipping at the peaks of my nipples making me moan. Cupping my sex, using her thumb to circle my clit, then dropping her mouth down there. “You’re so wet baby.” She moaned and then licked my slit. My mind drifted to Alwin, and my body went rigid with regret.

“Niya.” I gasped as she sucked on my clit, pumping two fingers inside of me. Reaching my hands to her head, I urged her to me. “I have wanted this for so long, but I need to tell you something.”

“Whatever it is I don’t care Serena.” She kissed me again and I tasted sweet on her lips.

“You need to know that I have feelings for another.” She stopped mid kiss. I could not decipher what she was feeling. But she has always been hard to read.

“If you want me Serena, you can have me. If you want the other person, you can have them. If you want us both, you can have us both.”

“I love you.” Was all I said then I got lost in the bliss of passion. Getting lost in the grinding of our wet lips. I lapped at her slit, thrilling in

the moaning from her. This felt so good, but I still felt a slight betrayal to Alwin. I was giving my maidenhood to Niya, and she was giving it to me.

“Serena.” She panted as I pumped two fingers in her sex and my other found the puckered opening to her rear. Slipping it in and out in the same rhythm. I sucked on her clit, and she squirmed, coating me with her wetness. “Ancients, Serena I’m going to-” In a burst of white light, she climaxed all over me. My tongue lapping through it.

I crawled to her, kissing her softly as she came down from her high, the light slowly fading. “I love you too Serena.”

We made love multiple times in the snow, using my wings too keep us warm. Over and over, the passion, the heat, giving into all the need and desire for one another. We laid cuddling in each other’s arms. My breast pressed into her soft back, as our fingers interlaced.

“Tell me about this other lover of yours? Is it another woman? Or man?” Niya asked.

“His name is Alwin, and we haven’t had sex yet.” She chuckled, turning toward me.

“I can’t lie and say I’m not jealous, but I also can’t help but imagine what it would be like to have him between us.” I dampened at the thought. She must have noticed because her hand went to my sex. “I think you would love that wouldn’t you?”

“We need to rest.” I moaned breathlessly as she pumped into me. “Niya.” As much as I did not want to stop, we needed to talk about everything.

“What’s wrong?” she asked removing her hand from me.

“There is a lot that has happened the past two months we need to talk about.”

“I know. You have wings.” She smiled at me and then ran a finger on the inside of one. “How did that happen?”

“That is towards the end, let’s start at the beginning.” She listened intently as I informed her of everything that had happened after I left. How Odith tricked me into believing she was my friend. How I trained to defend myself and how I fell for Alwin.

“I’m going to kill that traitorous bitch for hurting you.” Niya remarked and that was unlike her.

“I don’t think she is alive. The ceiling was crumbling down as I jumped through the portal.”

“We should go back just to be sure.” It made sense. I did not exactly see them die. “Do you still have the moon card?”

“No. Somewhere along the way, the cards disappeared, but I don’t think they belong to anyone now.” She leaned in and kissed me again. “We need to rest and tomorrow we travel to Ermlon.”

“How? I thought you went there by portal.”

“Alwin and I have a connection. Somehow, someway, could be my new powers, I just know which direction we need to travel in.”

“I love seeing you like this.” She said with a smile.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Confident, powerful, it’s sexy as hell, and I think I am ready to ravish you again.” Ancients help me.

We dressed the next morning after having more sex. She said she wanted to have me all to herself before I shared my bed with Alwin. That way, if I decided I only wanted one of them, she had an upper hand. Which made me laugh.

The flight back was long, but we made it to the outside of the castle by nightfall. “This is Ermlon?” she asked unimpressed.

“Yes. Isn’t it marvelous?” I asked as I interlaced my fingers with her.

“Sure.” She spoke. I knew she would be unimpressed because this place is not as lavish as Gavilan. We were greeted by some guards, who

escorted us to the War Room, I held Niya's hand tightly as we entered, and all eyes fell on us. Alwin's at once went to our joined hands.

"Serena is that you?" he made his way toward me, I let go of Niya, running up to him, I embraced him with a kiss. "I thought you were dead. We saw the rubble, but we couldn't find you."

"I know there is much to be discussed but first," I gesture to Niya, and she approached. "This is Niya, she is here as an ally."

"Welcome Niya, we were just plotting how to take down the Gnaxtor armies."

"About that," she started, and I shot her a glance. "The Gnaxtor King isn't the only enemy you all need to be worried about. Queen Lilac has prepared her armies to march into war here."

"Niya, why didn't you tell me that last night? Or this morning?"

"You two spent the night together?" I heard the jealousy in Alwin's voice.

"We were preoccupied." She said as her eyes going to the floor. Openly admitting that we did more than just sleep last night.

"Well come on Confessor tell us every ting." Pekka ordered. She approached the table.

"The Queen plans to invade from all angles."

"How is that possible?" Lena asked.

"I'm not entirely sure, but somehow she has a fleet of ships coming from the seas. An army fighting from the skies, and then plans to use the territory of Amarathian to combine both armies. There will be all manner of Essence users and Tarot Masters on the front lines." When she finished speaking, the room irrupted in angered shouting about the best approach. While my mind scrambled to figure out what the best strategy is. The King wanted my blood, the Queen wanted me in her Guard but only as a pureblood.

I have always been a pureblood. Just one of a kind. Which means this war is not just about my power, it is about my allegiance.

“Everyone shut up.” I yelled and the room went silent.

“The Queen and King have something in common none of you are thinking about.” I walked around them, stopping between Niya and Alwin. “They want me. The King wants my power, the Queen wants my allegiance. I am a phoenix, the first since the Ancients walked the earth.”

“You are not sacrificing yourself again.” Alwin growled.

“I’m not talking about sacrificing.”

“Tell us Serena, don’t leave us in suspense.” Alwin urged.

“We bring them together. They want to take over our world, purge it of non-purebloods, well I say to hell with them. We will not yield, we will not falter, and we will destroy them. Alwin, you will contact Braxor and get his aid bringing the dragons to rein their fire down upon our enemies. Pekka, you will lead our army. Lena, you, and the others will remain here, fortifying the castle. We still want a home to come back to after this. Niya, you will gather as many loyal Confessors as you can to help bring justice.”

“What about me?” Alwin asked.

“You and I are going to take them down.” He smiled at me.

“Alwin, you need to take lessons in leadership from her. She a good one.” Pekka remarked.

“Well, you all have your assignments, tomorrow, we move.” The room cleared all except us three and an awkwardness filled the space.

“Niya,” I said turning to her, “I need to be alone with him. Talk about everything, especially with us going to war tomorrow.”

“I understand.” She cupped my cheek and then kissed me softly.

“Find Rose, she can show you to some guest rooms.” When Niya left, I approached Alwin. Sitting myself on the table in front. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He said and then nudged himself between my thighs.

“We need to talk.” He brushed my hair behind my ears, just like always. “Niya and I, well we...” I trailed off.

“You had sex.” He answered for me; my head dropped low with shame, and I was not sure why. “Serena,” he tilted my head up to meet his gaze. I was expecting anger but all I saw was lust. “I will not ask you to choose between me and her, but if you do, I will respect it.”

“Tonight, I want you. All of you to be mine and me to be yours.” I felt tears swelling in my eyes. He wiped them away. “I don’t want to lose either of you because I love you both.”

That was all I needed to say before we were whisked into his bed chambers. Kissing me deeply, passionately, sending sparks of heat through me. Ancients it felt good. Our clothes were on the floor, my back on his silken sheets as he hovered over me. “Say it again.” He moaned.

“You’re mine.” I gasped as he took my nipples between his teeth. His harden cock rubbing at my entrance and I wanted him inside of me. Flipping him over, I sank down onto him. My wings erecting with the movement as he adjusted himself. His hands moving to my hips and the stretching, the heat, all of it was overwhelming. I moved on him, my hips rolling as if I was riding a horse.

“Serena.” He moaned, his hips meeting my rhythm. His thumb found my clit, moving in such teasing circles. I could not hold my release any longer, screaming his name as I let my climax drench him. He released at the same time, roaring my name, thrusting as he filled me with his seed.

Panting, our sweaty bodies entangled, coming down from our high, I kissed him again. “Holy shit.” Was all he said.

“I know.” It was unexpected and I enjoyed it more than when I was with Niya. Which made me feel awful. My time with her felt different, more out of the need to have her. With Alwin, I felt passion, fire, and love. If I choose, I know I will lose her. And that scares me because I just got her back.

ALWIN



AS I LIE AWAKE WITH MY GIRL WRAPPED IN MY ARMS, HEAD ON MY CHEST, I feel happy. She came back to me and that was all I wanted for the twenty-four hours sense she left.

Niya, her other lover was with her and I thought I would be furious at her for choosing to be with her first, but I'm not. She told me the truth and I knew from the moment I started watching over her the feelings she had for her.

I lost myself in her when she told me she wanted to be mine. The feeling of our bond consummating was powerful. I won't make her choose between me and Niya. That is not who I want to be to her.

A seed of dread formed in my head at the thought of her not choosing me. Would I be able to let her go? I already did once and she came back. Tomorrow we go to war and I still feel like we need more time. Time to get to know each other.

Niya was there for her the past ten years. They had time to grow with each other and now, I don't know how much time I will have before we are separated once again. Gods I sound jealous. I am jealous.

Getting out of bed, I walk over and pour myself a glass of water.

"Alwin," I hear Serena mutter. "Come back to bed." Turning I see her sitting up, the sheet pooled at her waist revealing her plump breast making

all my blood rush to my cock.

“As you wish.” Placing the glass down, prowling onto the bed I kiss her softly. I feel her hand wrap tightly around me motioning it up and down.

“Ready for round two, love?” I ask. She giggles and replaces her hand with her mouth sending my senses into overdrive.

Sinking lower I feel the moist heat in her tight mouth as her tongue dances around my shaft. Lifting her head from me I pull her face up and kiss her deeply tasting myself on her.

“Serena,” I say. “If tomorrow ends badly I need you to know that you are the best thing to ever happen to me.” She straddles me as I speak, sinking her wetness down on me. “When you do that I can’t concentrate.”

“This?” she teases as her hips begin to roll. Slamming her onto the mattress. I pin her wrist down and thrust inside her clamping my mouth onto her breast. Thrilling in the moan of her pleasure.

“I need you to know that I will love you no matter what the future brings. You will have my loyalty until I take my last breath.” She stills looking at me with those beautiful bright eyes.

“You will be in my future Alwin.” She states before motioning for me to continue. I take it slow, wanting this time to last longer. Both of us needing to be lost in the ecstasy and passion of the moment.

SERENA



THE NEXT MORNING, ALWIN AND I SHOWERED TOGETHER, SPENDING AN extreme amount of time ravishing our bodies. I still have the salted taste of his seed in my mouth after I went down on him. Something we both look forward to doing again. If we survive. I remember what he said last night, and I can't help but smile knowing that Alwin will always choose me. No one has ever chosen me.

"Good morning Serena." Niya said in the war room.

"Morning." I said trying to avoid her eyes.

"How was your night?" she asked while taking a seat across from me. It was just us two, the others would arrive shortly.

"Good. And you?" this was too weird.

"Good, Rose kept me company." There it was her jealousy showing because she knew what happened between me and Alwin.

"Niya," I started but then the doors opened, and the others walked in.

"As discussed," Alwin started as they all took their seats. "Braxor has his dragons ready. All the pieces are set except two. The King and Queen. How do we bring them to where we want them?"

"Odith, if she is still alive. Which I am sure that scaley bitch is."

"How do you intend on getting her here?" Alwin asked.

“I summon her, just like before. She can summon portals still, regardless of her abuse of the cards.”

“And if she is dead?”

“Then I go to the Queen myself.” There was silence, then nods of understanding.

“Let me do it.” Niya said after a few moments.

“Do what?” I asked

“I am the Queen’s personal Confessor; I can get close enough to bend her to my will and force her to reveal her true self to the kingdom.” This is a new Niya. So full of rage and violence.

“That could work.” Pekka said. The other agreed, but I remained silent, studying her. Something felt off, wrong, this is not the real Niya. It cannot be, but who is it? My answer came with a gust of wind that knocked us all from the table. The transparent figure of *The Fool* stood in front of me and then I saw her. Odith was standing where Niya had been sitting.

“Where is she?” she smirked, but I saw what had happened when I left that crumbling castle. Her once flawless body was covered in scars, her hair was matted, but around her neck, glinting off the light, was my amulet.

“This thing is quite powerful.” She said as she followed my gaze.

“Where is Niya?” I snarled getting to my feet.

“Oh, she is right where you left here. With the Queen in Gavilan.” Gasping at what that meant. “Might I say you are a good lay. Even Rose shuttered at my touch.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh honey, don’t you remember, you already did. Over and over, tell me, was he as good as me?” she smirked pointing at the fuming Alwin who had his swords out.

“You can’t compare.” Hurling myself toward her with my blades, she knocked me into the wall.

“Like I said, this amulet is quite powerful. You should’ve never lost it in the first place.” She toyed with it. “Your Mother must have been very powerful to conjure up this kind of magic.”

“I don’t need it to destroy you.” She laughed.

“You’re not understanding. You cannot touch me while I am wearing it. Adorned by blood magic I can only assume. Nothing and no one can hurt you. That is how you have been able to survive all these years. Shame really, now I get to take your powers, and destroy this pitiful place.”

“Traitorous whore.” Pekka yelled and came at her with his axe. Before it came down on her back, it turned on him, chopping his head clean off. Blood splattering the walls and his body thudding to the floor. A puddle forming around him.

The others joined in, attacking from all angles, and she killed them with the flick of her wrist. All that was left was me and Alwin. Our eyes locked to one another, a silent conversation, as we both charged at her. My body morphing into the golden figure of the Phoenix. Alwin’s morphing into the darkened state of his shadows.

“You can’t stop me.” Odith yelled holding her hands up, willing those invisible chains around us. “I am all powerful.”

My mind went calm, interlacing my fingers with his, a shield forming around us. I envisioned all the cards again, just like last time. Each one, charging in full force at the manipulator breaking down her shield. Opening my eyes, I charged forward, pushing Alwin out of the way. My hand clamping on my amulet, ripping it from Odith’s throat. I felt the warmth of her blood on my hand with my blade in her heart. Then nothingness as her life left her eyes.

Stumbling backwards, I fell to the floor, as my hands went to the blade sticking from my gut.

“Serena.” Alwin raced to me, lifting me up into his arms. Tears falling from his eyes.

“Hi.” I spoke.

“Hi.” He pressed his lips to me and then his hands went to my wound.

“Alwin,” I started, and he shook his head. “It’s okay. When I die, I will be at peace.”

“No, I can’t lose you, I just got you. Please Serena do not give up, I love you.” He was kissing me, holding me, his wet tears mixing with my blood.

“Alwin, when I die, bury me back in my hometown. I know it is not much, but it was my home. Promise me.”

“No, because you are not dying.” His hand gripped the hilt of the blade, pulling it from me, but I did not feel the pain. My body was numb, and I was dying.

“Look at me.” I cupped his face, my blood staining it. “Thank you for saving me Alwin. For loving me, giving me a home. You will be okay. Purge this world of the evil that is trying to destroy it. The Gnaxtor King, the Queen, our people will never be safe if they live.”

“Stop, you can’t die. You are supposed to be my wife.” Sorrow filled me.

“You didn’t ask yet.” We both chuckled and I was coughing, my blood in my throat. There would be no coming back from this. “Tell Niya, that I loved her, tell her the truth of what happened. Can you do that?”

“Okay.” He knows too.

“My life is complete and knowing that I am dying, I will tell the Ancients that I died with love in my heart. You are my heart Alwin.” My eyes fluttered close as he kissed me one last time. My mind shifting into darkness as my soul left my body.

ALWIN



“IF WE BURN HER, SHE CAN BE REBORN OUT OF THE ASHES.” I SAID PUTTING Serena’s lifeless body on the pyre in the middle of the courtyard.

“If this doesn’t work, how will you fulfill your promise to her about being buried in her homeland?” Rose asked me.

“I will take her ashes, scatter them across the seas. Then, I am marching into Gavilan and killing the Queen.” Holding the torch in my hand, I went to light the pyre, but a shout stopped me.

“Wait.” Turning around, a small woman dressed in all white approached us. “It won’t work.”

“Niya?” I asked.

“Yes. You can’t just use any fire to bring her back.”

“What are you doing here? How did you know what happened?” she touched Serena’s blood-stained face.

“I kept a connection with her. I never told her, but it was my way of protecting her, keeping an eye on her. When the connection broke, I knew it must have meant she died.” She turned toward me. Serena’s attraction toward her was called for. She was breathtaking with her midnight-colored skin, green eyes, and black hair.

“That answers those questions, but what do you mean, the right fire?” I doused the torch in a bucket of water.

“She was reborn the first time Odith killed her. Killing her half-human self. She was then reborn into her true form as the Phoenix. For her to be reborn again, we need fire from a phoenix.”

“Impossible, they are all extinct.”

“No, they aren’t.” she rummaged through a brown pouch she brought with her, opening a book to show me a page about them. “I have been researching this my entire life since I learned how to read. The Phoenixes are not extinct, they just migrated to a different realm.”

“How do you suppose we get to it before her body turns to rot?” Rose asked.

“We use this,” Niya pulled out a tarot with the picture of a regal woman dressed like in an emerald gown, holding a staff, and shield. “*The Empress* can preserve her state and create it a knew when the time comes to retrieve her soul from the spirit realm.”

“How long will it last?” I asked.

“We have a week, maybe two tops before the magic will dissipate.” Niya answered. I pondered this, but it is the only way to save her.

“Do it.” I said and Rose tried to protest, but I let Niya do her work. The transparent figure appeared, placing a hand on Serena’s forehead, and a glass coffin formed around her body. The Empress stayed poised in his spot.

EPILOGUE

THE GIRL WHO WAS BORN A HALF-LING, REBORN INTO A PHOENIX, IS NOW IN the spirit world. Watching over her friends as they journey to save her from the inevitable fate of death. The Dark Elf journeys with a Confessor and Pixie, to harness the Phoenix Fire to save his love. The journey to the other realm will not be easy. As they enter, they discover their magic is gone. Their only weapons are the ones strapped to their sides and the deck of cards the Confessor wields.

The question still to be answered. Will they save the girl in time? What will happen to Xora if their Phoenix is lost in the realm of death?

SERENA'S READING REFERENCE CHAPTER FIVE



INDEX OF CARDS



Awareness

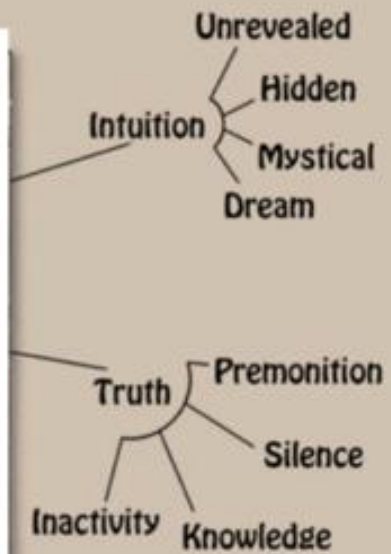
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Stagnant
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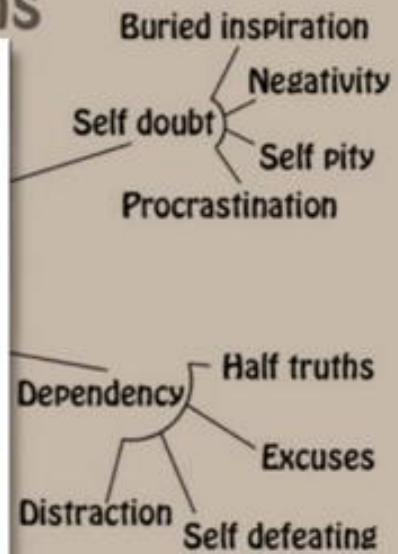
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Discovery
New Direction

Nurturing

Expansion
Friendships
Rewarding
Light
Blossoming

Enlightening
Vibrant
Refinement
Brilliance
Clarity



Repositioned
Adjustment
Renewal
New life
Improvement

Healing
Safe haven
Recovery
Comfort
Warmth

New Awareness



Perfect Balance

Dreams Materialized

Unity

Acceptance

Harmony

Wordly success

Perfection

Tranquility

Happiness

Journey's end

Discovery



Devotion

Joyful

Vitality

Creative energy

Fulfillment

Freedom

Awareness

Realization

Genius

Understanding

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My husband, Phil-for believing in me,
allowing me to take time away from us, and for the unconditional love you
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My daughters-for always being the light of
my life and enticing my imagination further with the games we play.

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To Mike for trusting me with this project we talked about for a while. I
know it took a little longer than expected.

THANK YOU

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Michael Runk
Reiki Master/Teacher



Intuitive Tarot Advisor

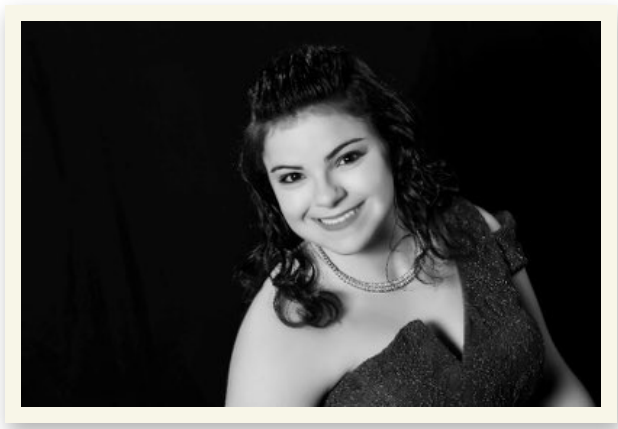
Michael completed his initial Reiki training in 2004 and completed his Master training in 2005. In early February of 2020 he completed his advanced Holy Fire III Karuna Reiki Master training. As with his Reiki journey his journey with the cards began in 2004 and they have been a part of his life ever since. Michael has been reading professionally since early 2020 having read for clients from every corner of the world. He now provides a full range of Reiki services and Tarot readings as well as teaching students who wish to learn either or both disciplines.

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C. M. Hano is a small-town Indie Author, best known for her bestselling adult fantasy series *The Princess Chronicles*, and her upcoming adult novels, *Blood Oath*, and *Night & Day*. Her books are published via Amazon and Barnes & Nobles. A Southern native, C. M. lives in Georgia with her husband, two daughters, and dog.

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